
OKOBORE HIME TO ENTAKU NO KISHI

Story by: Ishida Rinne

Art by: Okiya Ichiko

Brought to you by:

AQUA Scans

Translation: Crystalhikari

Raw Provider: Mizuouji & Icarus Bride

Proofreading: Fallingwind & Shiningninja

To the reader:

This is not only the second light novel we start but also our 300th release! We want to thank to all the people who helped us donating to purchase the light novels and keep doing it with the Aria every month! We hope to see more of you guys to discuss and talk about this awesome story in the blog! We love to get feedback and every comment is always encouraging us to keep working on great projects like this so please remember to drop by the website, okay!

-Mizuouji



Astrid Gale
10th Knight of the
Royal Chivalrie Order.
Duke's junior.

Leonhardt
The Fourth Prince and
Len's younger brother from
the same mother. He is a
History professor and an
eccentric person.

Duke Barcher
A member of the Royal
Chivalrie Order whose
swordsmanship is one of
the best - if not the best.
He received a forceful
invitation from Len and...

Friedhelm
Sommevesle's First Prince
and Len's eldest brother
from a different mother.
He has charisma that can
charm people.

Guido
Sommevesle's Second
Prince and Len's second
elder brother from a
different mother. A
prime minister type that
has both the skills for
detailed planning and
implementation.

Leticia
First Princess of
Sommevesle. Known
as the "Leftover
Princess" and the next
queen. She already
knew that she would
succeed the throne.

Okobore
Hime to Entaku
no Kishi

PROLOGUE

Looking at all of the dresses I have, I select the one that allows me to be who I want to be.

The silver embroidery on the pure white silk radiating a bluish glow showed off her white skin, and the diamonds studded on her dress glittering like stardust complemented her beauty. With the pair of shoes, earrings and necklace exclusively made for that specific dress to complete the look, Leticia - third child of the current king and first princess of the Kingdom of Sommevesle - walked in long strides within the castle one afternoon as if her high heels were nothing and with her smooth, shiny golden hair bouncing with every step.

Leti, who was exceptionally beautiful today, had her steel blue eyes - reminiscent of the winter skies - focused on one point.

“Is... is there anything wrong, Princess!?” The retainer, who was surprised with Leti's extravagant dress, asked the approaching princess. But Leti ignored both the retainer's question and the penetrating looks directed at her. She simply continued walking straight towards her goal with three guards added to her entourage.

“Where is Duke Barchet?” Leti asked a random knight as she reached her place of destination, the camp of the Royal Chivalric Order. **She** smiled sweetly and watched, amused, as the knight blushed.

“Ah... if - if it is Duke-senpai, he is over there...”

“I see. Thank you,” the princess said as she moved towards the direction the knight pointed out. Her steps were graceful but quick, and they were silent.

I have found you...

As soon as Leticia saw the tall, black-haired lad with blue eyes, she took a deep breath and called out in a clear and beautiful voice, “—Duke Barchet!”

The princess' voice echoed throughout the clear skies. The knights in the camp were startled and looked at Leti. This might still be inside the castle, but as this was a camp for knights, hearing a woman's voice was rare. To add to that, the woman was Princess Leticia; they would, of course, become tense in case something happened.

“—oh, Your Highness, Princess Leticia,” said a surprised Duke, the princess' target and a member of the Royal Chivalric Order. Princess Leticia, with her chin held up high, walked towards Duke.

‘Duke Barchet – the oldest son of Baron Bachet’s family and the 6th knight of the Royal Chivalric Order. He is a close friend of the first prince, Prince Friedhelm, but his family’s allegiance is with the second prince, Prince Guido. He really is my only choice.’

The beautiful princess’ stare was sharp and piercing. Even Duke could not help but admire her eyes, admiration that was enough to make him want to fall back. But he was a knight highly esteemed within the Order and also said to be the best knight among them; he could not back down, so he glared back at the princess with the same intensity.

“I order you to be my knight. Accept the first seat in the “Knights of the Round” gratefully. Hurry up and bow down to me.”

The words of princess ended the glaring contest and were so unexpected that Duke was dumbfounded for a moment.

“So... if I heard, you’re ordering me to be your knight, right?” Duke asked this not only because the invitation—or rather, order—surprised him; it was more because the image he had of “Princess Leticia” was different. He assumed from the stories he heard that the princess was a sweet and gentle young lady, hurting because of the strife between her two older brothers. But the person in front of him was not even a little bit similar to what he had imagined.

“Yes, you heard me correctly. I was even thinking that once you take your seat as the First Knight of the Round, I will grant you the title of ‘Duke’ to give truth to your name.”



Duke's name, the same as the title, had always been his complex. He was often teased because of this since his family's rank was only that of a Baron.

While deep inside his heart he was already cursing, *'this bastard, no, this bitch,'* his reply did not show any bit of his emotions.

"I'm sorry, but I decline your offer."

"Is that so? I think I am entitled to know the reason, am I not?"

The princess unexpectedly gave up easily, but her condescending attitude, acting all high and important, irritated Duke more. *'Well, she really is high and important, but still...'*

“It just means that even I have the right to choose who will be my master.”

“So in other words, you’re saying that I am not qualified to be your master, is that so?”

“Yes. Since I’d rather not be known as the ‘Leftover Princess’s lover.’”

Leti’s eyes flared up the moment she heard “Leftover Princess.”

Leticia Elle Kreutzer, the third child of the king and the first princess. Her mother descended from a prince’s family; thus, she was originally in a position close to the throne compared to the other princes and princesses. However, when her mother died when she was seven years old, she left Cattleya Castle together with her brother, Prince Leonhardt, since it was full of her mother’s memories. Since then, they lived peacefully in the Royal Villa and took a step back from the battle for the throne.

The two excellent princes from different mothers were already in the lead of the race for the throne, so the first princess, simply living peacefully with her younger brother, was left behind. However, because the two princes were so excellent, if either one would be the next King, it was rumored that a civil war would be inevitable. So the current king, hurt by the dispute between his two sons, devised a plan to prevent a civil war from happening. Thus, on the seventeenth birthday of the first princess, he announced that his successor would be neither Prince Friedhelm nor Prince Guido, but rather Princess Leticia. This was how the name “Leftover Princess” came to be. It was an alias given to the princess who received the leftover crown from her two exceptionally excellent brothers.

“I understand your point. Anyway, I only came here to declare war with you, so I shall take my leave now for today.”

“Today?”

“Yes, today. I have no intention on giving up on you, so you’d better use this time to finish any preparations you need.”

With that, Leti gallantly turned around and walked away with her long, soundless, elegant strides without even glancing back.

‘What’s with that attitude?’ thought Duke as he watched the princess walk away. He was just irritated that it seemed like he was seen as someone who would easily say ‘yes’ if he were invited to take the first seat in the Knights of the Round.

“...Duke-sempai, that girl a while ago...”

“Huh? Ah, *that* was your future queen. Ordering me out of the blue to bow down my head to her... Who does she think she is?”

“Um...the future queen? But isn't she so beautiful? It was my first time seeing a girl that beautiful.”

Duke, sighing on the side, thought that Astrid – his blushing and excited junior, was somewhat amazing.

“You heard us, right? So you should know that even though she looks like a beautiful princess, she is also high-handed, domineering woman who does not have even an ounce of cuteness in her.”

“But I still think she is great, being able to order sempai to bow down and all.”

“I wonder why I feel like an idiot when I am talking with you...”

Soon, Duke's comrades in the Order started gathering around him and he was sure that they would attack him with questions on what just happened.

While Duke was being harassed by his fellow knights, the princess, whose offer was refused, went back to her room and released all of her anger by attacking her pillow.

“What's with that guy!? He really is that idiot Friedhelm's best friend. One of these days, I'll make you cry because of treason!”

Leti lifted the pillow high up above her head and threw it hard to her bed, but the bed was so soft that the pillow landed on it without a thud. If Princess Leticia were alone, she would have thrown a fit, but her pride as a princess—no... her pride as the next *queen*—could not forgive herself if it were known that she was extremely irritated that she failed in her invitation. She clenched her teeth and resisted the impulse to act unbecoming for her station.

“Leftover Princess”? Fine! I'll make it the best compliment of the kingdom!”

Leti once again lifted the pillow and threw it back to the bed with all her might.

OKOBORE HIME TO ENTAKU NO KISHI

The Leftover Princess and the Knights of the Round

Story by: Rinne Ishida

Art by: Ichiko Ichiko

Brought to you by:

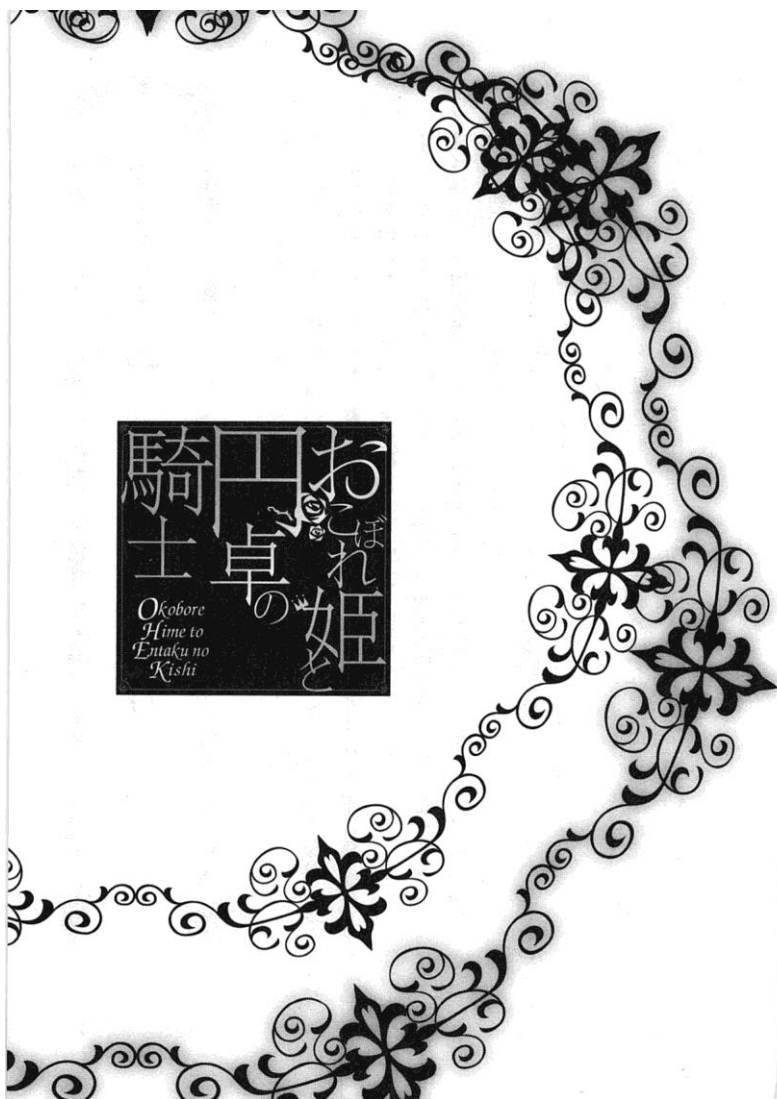
AQUA Scans

Credits

- ❖ Raws: Icarus Bride
- ❖ Translation: Crystal Hikari
- ❖ Proofreading: Fallinwind
- ❖ Quality Checking: Mizuouji

Translator's note:

The Japanese honorifics were kept in the translation of the dialogues of the characters to show the respect or adoration shown by the characters. Footnotes were provided to explain these honorifics.



CHAPTER 1 KNIGHTS OF THE ROUND

This was the "Knight King's Space." On the floor was a carpet with the story of the gods embroidered on it, framed with golden ears of grain. Hanging on the ceiling was a wooden chandelier and on the carpet was a beautiful patina table made of deep evergreen oak. Out of the same wood were chairs scattered around the room adorned with carvings on its boards, enough to be considered as unique art pieces—creating the same pattern would be impossible.

There were three people in this room "today." One of them, a man with a golden mane resembling that of a lion, rested his feet on the priceless desk like it was nothing and faced Leti with a wide grin on his face.

"Your mood is fouler than usual, Queen Leticia. *When* are you in right now?"

"You are annoying, aren't you, King Alexander? I am in right after I was proclaimed to be the next queen and was just refused by stupid man."

The man called King Alexander laughed out loud as if Leti's predicament was something pleasant, rubbing Leti's nerves the wrong way.

The silver-haired man sitting on a distant chair inserted a bookmark into his book before closing it to join the conversation.

"There is no need to be impatient, Queen Leticia. I had the experience of bowing down fifty-five times to someone until he agreed to be my knight."

“I have heard of that story so many times already in my own time and it has been passed down as your impressive anecdote, Administrative King Karlheinz. It is now considered as an idiom, ‘fifty-five bows.’ So was it really fifty-five times?”

“I see it was passed down quite accurately. It was a good thing I kept a diary then.”

“If it were me, I would leave an order to burn all my diaries when I die since I only rant in there. I might wish to die again even if I already did if I would be known as the Ranting Queen,” snorted Leti.

The One-handed man laughed listlessly at Leti's little speech.

“It will be fine since it is, after all, you, Queen Leticia. If it were me, I will probably be known as the Traitor King or Wrecked King... no... maybe there won't even be subjects left to give me such a title...”

“You are dark as usual, King Oswald. When are you in your time?”

“I'm on my fifth year of war. I escaped here even though I know I should not.” One-handed King Oswald's sigh was heavy.

Given the dark atmosphere, Leti declared that she would be going back when King Alexander said something to her.

“Queen Leticia, there is no need for you to follow what that stupidly serious Karlheinz said. Those who agree because you bowed down to them only want sincerity.”

“Then what do you suggest I do?”

“Hmmm... if it were me, I would have beaten them to a pulp and made them swear the Knight’s Oath, but since you are a woman, the fastest way is to stage a dramatic act, like making him believe that it is destiny.”

“Destiny?”

“Men are weak against those things, you know? So just follow what your uncle says.”

“How many “great” shall I skip to trace you? Besides, the dynasty has changed already after your reign, so I am supposedly not a direct descendant from your line.

Anyway, I think there is some merit in the advice given by the Lion King Alexander, who has never lost even one battle during his reign, so I will give it some thought.”

Leti left, saying her agreement with King Alexander and thinking about her next step.





Leti woke up to the chirping birds and warm sunlight in a cool day. She felt a bit confused from the lack of the wooden chandelier hanging on the ceiling when she remembered that she had already gone back to reality.

“I probably go the Knight King’s space a lot recently because I wanted to escape somewhere.”

Lion King Alexander was there right before a revolution happened – led by his friend and trusted Prime Minister. For Administrator King Karlheinz, it was after he was betrayed by his beloved wife, while One-handed King Oswald was in a dire situation at war.

All of the kings in the Knight King’s space had one thing in common whenever they went there: they were at a loss on what they should do. So for the other kings, they surmised that they would be seeing Leti frequently during the time after she was announced to be the heir to the throne.

“Come now Your Highness, the next queen, Queen Leticia, we have to make our second bow today!” said Leti to herself.

Ever since the present king announced on Leticia’s seventeenth birthday last month that she would be the next queen, her maids were strangely spirited for some reason. While her maids were busily working themselves, Leti was drinking her morning tea in pure sophistication.

Leti thought that a husband need simply be a decoration beside her and she would not be giving him any power over the Kingdom's politics and government, but it was still an undeniable fact that selecting her husband *was* an important part of her job.

"I shall work after this, so no one is allowed to disturb me until I say so. Bring to my room the portraits and documents Prince Friedhelm and Prince Guido brought over."

The maids obediently followed Leti's orders and carried into her room the portraits of her husband candidates, burying a third of her spacious room. Leti was nauseated with the number of portraits, but she still locked her door and prepared to work.

"...Well then, let's start."

Leti took off her beautiful dress, released her feet from her high heels, changed into a fresh new dress, and wore durable walking boots that she was fond of recently. She removed all of her accessories and simply tied her hair with a velour ribbon. Leti looked at herself in the mirror and declared her *Princess incognito outfit* complete.

Without any hesitation, Leti leaned forward outside her window and leapt to the nearby tree. This had been always her escape route ever since she was a child. The people who see her as the perfect epitome of a princess would find it hard to believe that she had been doing this for a long time.

"All right. Perfect score."

Leti praised herself as she got out of the castle without anyone noticing her. She dusted off her skirt and arranged her dress as she walked.

“The Royal Chivalric Order should be coming around here for their patrols...”

Leti ordered her servants to investigate the schedule of Duke Barchet, who had the nerve of refusing her in front of everyone. Using the information her servants gathered, Leti decided to ambush Duke while he was on duty.

“Hello there! Today is a good day, isn’t it?”

“Oh Lady Cia, long time no see! Are you out on a date today?”

Leti talked familiarly with a lady that passed by. She had escaped the castle many times to go and walk around the town near the castle, pretending to be a daughter of a poor baron. Unlike her brothers Friedhelm and Guido, the people only knew Princess Leticia by her name and the description that she was as beautiful as the late First Queen Consort, so she could easily go out and wander around town.

“There is someone I would like to be my knight but he refused me, so I wanted to ambush him and have him say ‘yes’ to me.”

“My, my, so there is someone who would refuse a beautiful young lady like you...”

“I am sure he has high ambitions and wants to be knight of a princess from a high ranking family.”

It was normal for a powerful, high ranking family to have several knights. But for a daughter of a low-ranked family, having a knight was equal to having a lover. This was where Duke’s refusal, *‘I do not want to be known as the Leftover Princess’ lover,’* came from.

While chatting idly with the lady, Leti scanned the street for a certain someone. Then a tall man, noticeably a head or two higher among the crowd, wearing a sour expression on his face caught her eye.

There you are!

Leti took a step forward, raised her arm and called out to him.

“Duke! I was waiting for you!”

For a moment, Duke wondered who that woman waving at him was when recognition hit him. He immediately scanned the area to search for Leti’s guards. Leti decided that Duke’s skills as a knight was tolerable when she saw his instant alertness upon recognizing her.

“See that tall person? He is the one I wanted to be my knight.”

Leti pointed out Duke, now pushing his way through the crowd towards her. Before Duke could even reprimand Leti and ask what she was doing there, she wrapped her arm around his surprising him with the unexpected act. He tried pulling away his

arm, but Leti tightened her grip on him while keeping a sweet smile plastered on her face.

“Oh my! ‘Duke’ is such a regal name, isn’t it? Let me see... Well, aren’t you a fine young man, Mr. Duke. Why did you refuse a fine, young woman like Lady Cia?”

“Huh? No... This is...”

“Is it because of a difference in social status? Are you an earl?”

“No, I’m a son of a baron...”

“Then you’re just equals! There isn’t any problem, is there?”

Duke glared at Leti. His look said, *why in the world am I being interrogated by a woman I don’t even know?* But Leti kept her poker face and did not help him in redirecting the woman’s chatter.

A man joined in their conversation. “Or maybe ya wannabe a member of the Knights of the Round, don’t yah, Mista Duke? Our next ruler is a queen, after all.”

“*Hahaha!* But isn’t it impossible for someone like you to be a Knight of the Round? So why don’t you just give up and be Lady Cia’s knight!”

The two strangers laughed amusedly while Duke straightened his back and did his best to keep a smiling countenance.

Being made fun of makes me want to say that the next Queen you're talking about had already offered me the first seat to her Knights of the Round and I flatly rejected her.

"Duke, how about we talk while walking? I know you are still in patrol duty."

"I think that'll be best." *I cannot stay here any longer.*

Duke said the required niceties and they took their leave, with him dragging Leticia by the hand as they were swallowed by the crowd.

After putting some distance and going to a less crowded place, Duke released his anger. "Oil! What are you doing here ALONE! Where are your guards?"

Leti twirled around, showing Duke her outfit as if saying, 'Did you not realize it?' But his face did not show any understanding.

"I am out traveling incognito, in disguise. I escaped from the castle."

"Huh? For someone appointed to be the next queen, you sure are a carefree person. That's the reason why you're called the *Leftover Princess*."

"Leftover Princess? Let them say what they want to. They gave me that title as a Princess and not as a Queen," Leti said flatly, flipping her hair over her shoulders with her hand.

“You can call this a job, you know, like information gathering. Information gets distorted as it gets farther from the source, so I sometimes go out to gather it directly since most of the information regarding the town will be so distorted once it reaches me in the castle and I already find it to highly unreliable.”

“Is that so?”

Duke was on guard with their surroundings as he listened to Leti's story, since she went to town alone and unescorted and he would have to protect her if something happened. But for Leti, she had no need for a guard, for she was *strongest* when alone and can move freely.

“I agree that what you’re doing, listening to your people, is a good thing as their next ruler, but I feel that you are already familiar with them. Why is that when you were appointed to be the heir just last month?”

“Indeed, what you said is correct. My succession to the throne was formally declared last month on my birthday but I already *knew*... I already knew I would be queen. I only did not how it would happen but I was sure that I would be. I did not bother telling anyone about this because I was sure no one would believe me.

Anyway, I will be dragging you anywhere and everywhere to hear the stories around town. Let us start now. We still have a lot of places to go to.”

“Huh? No, we’re going back to the castle. I’ll send you home now!”

“I will forgive your casual speech today but speak with me in that manner again tomorrow and you will find yourself crying because of treason. Are we clear? Yes? Then let us go over there.”

Leti pointed out an accessory shop across the road and she went inside to take a look at ribbons. Since Duke could not possibly say goodbye and leave her, he – in his Knight uniform – unwillingly followed the princess into the shop. Seeing a knight approach his shop, the shop owner promptly went out to greet him and ask if there were anything wrong.

“Uhm... No... I’m just with her...”

“Ah, I see. You’re Lady Cia’s lover, are you not? A beautiful lady and a courageous knight – what a perfect couple!”

Duke wondered how everyone they met came to that conclusion. But if he told them that they were not lovers, they would surely ask him how they were related. Since he did not know Leti's setting for her disguise, he could not say anything careless.

“Young man, you know, this is the time when the man pays for his lady. If you’re not careful about these kinds of things, you might find yourself abandoned in the near future.”

Even though Duke thought that he would be rather glad to be abandoned, he still grudgingly took out his wallet and paid for Leti's ribbons. He could not fathom why she, the princess of the kingdom, would have to buy her ribbons in this little shop when she probably had more than enough ribbons for her to use in a lifetime.

“Here, have some tea.”

“Why, thank you!”

“Thanks.”

Leti started a conversation with the shop owner as they drank their tea. Their topic was, of course, the season's hottest news: the next queen. The shop owner said that the next queen was apparently a very beautiful princess, and Leti threw in her complete agreement. It seemed that Leti did not have the charms of being shy or modest.

“Have you met her, Lady Cia?”

“No, a poor baron's daughter cannot possibly have met her, though I have seen her from afar. How about you, Duke?”

“...From afar... yes...”

“They said that Princess Leticia is a very splendid princess. I heard that she was the one who suggested and built the hospital in the west and the orphanage in the south. She was also the first one to donate for our festival here.”

The two princes competing for the crown, Prince Friedhelm and Prince Guido, focused on the military and foreign relations. Leti, on the other hand, was more active in promoting education and welfare. She had two reasons for doing so: one, to avoid her brother's eyes, and two, to get the hearts of the citizens. The good opinion that people had of her was proof of her hard work throughout the years.

Leti brought Duke everywhere she went to listen to the stories and opinions about the next queen. They had the consensus that if a civil war would be the result of either one of the princes ascending the throne, then it was a whole lot better if the kind-hearted princess succeeded the crown. Everyone welcomed the idea of having Princess Leticia as their next ruler.

After walking for a long time, Leti finally decided that it was time for her to go back to the castle.

“...Your reputation is quite good, huh?”

Duke complimented Leti as they walked towards the castle. His family was part of the peerage, though barely making the cut, and he had considered himself to be more affiliated with the Royal Chivalric Order so he was quite naïve when it came to the world of the nobles. But even someone like him only knew Princess Leticia as a kind and delicate princess before she was selected as the successor to the throne, but this changed to be the meek and beautiful ‘Leftover Princess.’

“I know that I am popular among the common people; however, the nobles and members of the peerage consider me as unimportant and that irritates me.”

Leti had three objectives for this particular incognito walk. First was to gather the latest rumors and gossip. Second was to know more about Duke as person, and third, to show Duke how good her reputation stood with the citizens.

Based on Duke’s reaction, Leti judged her plan a complete success. His opinion of her was slowly changing, moving away from the ‘Leftover Princess.’

Leti thought that this is the perfect chance to attack him. “So, did you change your mind about being my knight after hearing how good I am?”

Her first move was to lay down some of her cards on the table to gain his trust. This kind of game was Leti’s specialty.

“Let me tell you the reason why I selected you.”

Leti turned around and faced Duke. Her eyes were the same last night, filled with insight that could not possibly be owned by a woman. Had Leti been a man, Duke would have asked her for a duel.

“I already knew that I would be queen. I just did not know when or how, but thinking about it logically, there is a high

possibility that both of my older brothers were already dead so I never thought of establishing my own chivalric order.”

“You *knew*?”

Duke convinced himself that it was probably through fortune-telling or some prophecy, but Leti’s eyes told otherwise. Her eyes plainly say that she just simply knew.

“I wanted my brothers to be protected by the best of the best, so I did not mind even if the best knights were recruited to Seventh Heaven or Valkyrie. I did not want to succeed the throne because they died. But that did not happen and now, I am in a predicament of completing my Knights of the Round with the *rejects* – those that were not selected by either of my brothers. So am I supposed to have my knights that could only even be considered as *tolerable*? This is unreasonable!”

“There’s no helping it... you started late in the race.”

Duke understood Leti's point. The two princes, Prince Friedhelm and Prince Guido, both had the abilities and qualities of a King; it was natural that the talented knights would gather around them. So all of the knights left for Leti to choose from were those that were not chosen by either of the princes. Being grouped among them somehow hurt Duke’s pride, but he would not think about it for now.

“So if there is one among the rejects who can fill the First seat of the Knights of the Round, then that will be you, Duke Barchet, only you.

Duke thought that indeed, Leti was not just a Leftover Princess. Seeing her think and analyze about this matter made him feel that she may have in her the makings of a wise ruler. However, that alone was not enough for him to be her knight and bow down to her as his master.

“Princess, Your Highness, I...”

Duke suddenly sensed that something was wrong. He swiftly pulled Leti near him and covered her with his back. Soon, three street thugs came out of the shadows.

“Hey lady, we’re a bit short on cash here, why don’t ya lend us some?”

“You have a knight with you, of course you have some money there.”

Duke readied his hand on his sword, clicked his tongue and asked Leti in a whisper, “Your cover’s not yet blown, right? Three professional assassins will be tough to handle even for me, you know.”

Duke was well aware how dangerous Leti's position was as the heir to the throne. She did take away the crown from her two brothers, regardless of whether she had a part in it or not. If truth

be told, there were probably more people who would want her in harm's way rather than protect her. The three men might be normal thugs, but the worst case was that they were assassins sent by someone who thought Leti as a big hindrance in their plans. Duke's mind was already in a swirl of possibilities for this situation compared to Leti's calm demeanor and somehow indifferent sigh.

“Are you seriously telling me that?”

“Huh?”

Duke thought that Leti would call him stupid since she looked like she would, but instead he got a pat on his shoulder.

“The only person I know to be more beautiful than I do is Prince Guido. Do you not think it is quite natural that a knight dating someone as beautiful as me will be asked for a duel or two?”

“Don't call yourself beautiful. Try and be a bit modest, won't you?”

“For someone with my beauty, I think being modest simply sounds sarcastic. ... You can handle something like this, can you not? Do what you have to do and do not mind about your back at all.”

Duke thought that answering her with the decided “yes, yes, you are beautiful” or “I don't think so” was just troublesome and maybe sincerely complimenting her might give a more refreshing reaction.

...though shy and modest women are cuter and more to my liking.

Duke still had a few things to say but decided that it would be better focus at the task at hand.

“If you back down now, you’ll be leaving without a scratch. But if you dare lay your hands on her, don’t think that this’ll be over with a wound or two.” *‘Cause if you do anything to her, the princess and the next queen of this kingdom, you might regret you did anything. Be prepared to receive a capital punishment for that.*

Duke charged towards the attackers and the battle started.

“His swordsmanship is indeed one of the best I have seen. I am glad that he is as good as the report says.”

The scene playing in front of Leti was enough to send a normal princess crying, but Leti was no ordinary princess, and she watched the fight intently. Duke, despite fighting one against three, had the upper hand in the battle and he had yet to draw his sword. He hit them either with the hilt of his sword or his fist. His fighting style was in no way elegant and fit for a Knight, but this also meant that he had the confidence to win without even drawing his weapon.

Leti watched over the fight with a satisfied smile on her face. It was better than she had expected. Then she felt an additional presence from behind, drawing her attention from the battle in front.

“More company? Just when I had the chance to watch Duke in action...” *I guess it cannot be helped then.*

Leti turned around to face the new comers and snapped her finger.

“Oi! Are you ok?”

“Yes, I am fine. It was a complete win against three opponents without even a single scratch. They were not that strong, but it was not easy either. You really are fit to be a knight, to be *my* knight.”

“—Hey!”

Duke found two unconscious men lying on the floor beside Leti. He asked Leti who they were with his eyes and Leti replied by looking down at the men as if saying that he noticed it too late.

“Maybe they were planning to get your attention first, then their other members would attack me, but too bad for them because I know how to defend myself.”

“Even so! You should have called my attention when you noticed that there were others! Do you know how dangerous your situation is!? What would you do if you got hurt!?”

“I was the one who said to you that you need not worry about your back. I just wanted to keep my word.”

“Huh?”

“But that is not the whole of it. I also wanted to show you that I can fend for myself, that I was not just a beautiful princess and to have you owe me by protecting your back. That was why I finished them myself, but I guess it had the opposite effect and made you worry. You are a kinder person than I thought you were.” Leti smoothly shrugged off Duke’s anger.

Duke felt awkward when Leti pointed out that he was worried about her. He convinced himself that it was normal for a knight to worry about the future queen and that his worry was nothing personal. *Yes, I was worried for the next queen and not because I care about her.*

“*Senpaaaaaaai!*” Someone reported that a beautiful lady is in danger!”

An optimistic voice from the sky broke the two’s awkwardness. They looked up to see where the voice came from when their vision suddenly turned dark and a human form was going down straight at them. Even the calm Princess Leti could not hide her surprise.

“*Kyaa!?*”

¹ Senpai : a Japanese honorific for someone’s senior



The person who jumped from the roof and landed perfectly on the ground was Duke's junior, Astrid Gale. He stood up quickly as if it were nothing. He looked at Duke and noticed Leti standing beside him.

Astrid stared at Leti's face, thinking that she somehow looked familiar. Duke thought that it would be bad if Astrid recognized her so he quickly went between them to block Astrid's view, but it was too late.

“...*PRINCESS!*?”

Duke grabbed Astrid's head and dragged him closer.

“She is in disguise right now due to certain circumstances so keep it low. Do not tell anyone this, got that?” Duke said with his threatening voice known to make a crying child cry more. Astrid was overwhelmed with Duke's presence and nodded accordingly while repeating Duke's words, saying that he would not tell this to anyone.

“Astrid, I'll be sending this *beautiful lady* home so can I leave things here with you?

And another thing, how many times have I already told you not to run on the roofs? We had already received a complaint that an elderly woman nearly got a heart attack when she saw you doing that.”

“Eeeeh... but I cannot run in full speed on the road because of the people. Besides, I thought that it would be better if I reach

the crime scene as soon as possible, so I decided to use the roofs as shortcuts.”

Duke sighed, feeling tired with all the things happening. He wanted to give Astrid a long sermon but lost the energy to do so. This was one of the reasons why Astrid was known as a *tension-remover*. He was a knight with skills enough to go up the top, but his character was not suited to be one. Duke decided to put off his sermon for now since ensuring Leti's safety was more important than disciplining Astrid.

“I'll listen to your report later at camp. Do you need any help or reinforcements?”

“There are quite a handful of them, so I will appreciate it if they could spare some hands.”

“Got it. I'll have them send some help.”

Duke and Astrid did the necessary exchange for the transfer of authority. Then, Duke firmly held Leti's shoulder, shielding her away from Astrid's sight as they walk away. Leti did not even have a chance to say a word and was forced to walk without further discussion. She snuck a look at Astrid Gale and committed his face to her memory.

“You have a quite pleasant junior, Duke.”

“... I've got no complaints on his skills but...”

“His name?”

“Astrid Gale. He is from a commoner’s family but he does have the skills enough to be the leader of the Order. It is no exaggeration that he is the type of person that comes once in a century.”

Leti only saw Astrid as a young lad with red hair and gentle green eyes. His presence was more of a baker in training than that of a knight of the Royal Chivalric Order. But to hear Duke praise him openly, Leti thought that he was worth being investigated.

Based on Duke’s assessment, he can be one of my Knights, but if he really was that good, then it is highly probable he is already someone else’s...

“Is he already someone’s honorary knight? Is he already a member of someone’s private order such as Prince Friedhelm’s Seventh Heaven or Prince Guido’s Valkyrie?”

The word ‘knight’ in Sommevesle had two meanings.

One was *royal knight*. This referred to the members of the Royal Chivalric Order established to protect the peace and order of the kingdom. To join the Order, one had to study for two years in the Knight Academy regardless of social status, commoner or noble. After graduating from the Academy, an entrance exam would be taken to join the Order, and only those who passed it became a full-pledged Knight of the Royal Chivalric Order.

The other meaning was *honorary knight*. Once a person swore allegiance to a master, he could already be considered as an honorary knight. Honorary knights come in many types. There

were those who acted as bodyguards to their master, and there were those were simply knights by name and were selected due to their cleverness and skills. There were also some who simply wanted to flaunt their master's connection and rank.

Seventh Heaven and *Valkyrie* were the private chivalric orders established by Leti's brothers. Members of those two orders were all talented and superior knights that no one would dare contest.

"He is currently not serving anyone, but I know he is receiving invitations to join several orders. If you want, I can formally introduce you to him," Duke suggested to Leti, hoping that she would give up on him, but Leti did not give it a second thought.

"No, thank you. I currently have my eye on one knight right now: you. What was that we were talking about again? Before all of this commotion happened? ...Right."

Leti turned around and faced Duke.

"I was able to observe you, albeit a short time. When you accidentally met me in the street, you kept your composure and calmly scanned the area to ensure my safety. Your fighting style was not tied down by aesthetics and your insight is not clouded by age or social status. Out of all the *rejects*, you really stand out. Now, I want you to be my knight even more."

Leti's feelings changed from Duke being "the only one" to being "the one."

“Duke Barchet, I order you to be my knight. Gratefully accept the first seat in my Knights of the Round. Hurry up and bow down to me!”

Duke rejected Leti's previous invitation with a simple “I refuse,” but this invitation was different from the last. The words were the same but the weight behind those words was different. Duke decided to not run away and replied with the same gravity.

“I felt the sincerity in your words now, so I shall give you an honest answer in return. I wanted to be Prince Friedhelm’s knight. And I still feel the same. That’s it. No matter how appealing you might be as a master, you are not Prince Friedhelm and never will be.”

Duke and Friedhelm were classmates in the Knight Academy and they became friends easily. Duke believed that Friedhelm could be a good king and wanted to support the kingdom together with him. Friedhelm, too, felt the same way. So after graduating from the Academy, Friedhelm asked Duke to be his knight, but due to the structure of the peerage, where Duke’s family was under Guido, he refused Friedhelm’s offer and decided to stay under Guido out of duty to his family.

Leti answered nonchalantly to Duke’s obvious refusal. “Until here is fine. It will be more troublesome if they find us.”

When they reached the castle’s wall, Leti set her foot on the space in the wall and easily lifted herself up to the top. Duke was thinking about having that gap filled in to prevent her from going

to any of her *incognito walks* as he watched the princess climb up the wall.

“Regarding your answer a while ago...” Leti spoke to Duke from atop the wall, wearing a confident smile on her beautiful face. “I take it that you have trusted me enough to reveal your true feelings to me.”

“Were you even listening to what I said, Your Highness?”

“Yes. Listen I did. But *only* listen.”

Leti went down the wall after saying that, disappearing from Duke’s sight..

She really is just as the rumors say, a beautiful princess. But the rumors are not complete. Because inside, she is the perfect queen. Her high-handed personality and self-centeredness reminds me of someone...

“But with this, I can say that Sommevesle’s future is safe.”

Duke thought that the Leftover Princess would definitely be a brilliant queen and that it would be better if she could get excellent people to support her. But some part of him underestimated her persistency and thought that if he continued rejecting her offer, she would come to give up on him eventually.

Astrid, left to clean up the scene, was tying each person lying on the floor unconscious with a rope. The only thing left for him

to do was to wait for the others to come and help him bring the rogues back to camp for further questioning and write the incident report.

“One versus five... Duke-senpai is really amazing.”

Astrid walked towards the two unconscious men who had been lying on the floor beside Leti to confirm if they still had any weapons hidden in them. Upon inspection, he found that each of the men had one red straight mark on their nape.

“One hit on the neck rendered them unconscious. It’s already hard to cause a concussion, and to make it this cleanly—Duke-senpai really is amazing. He probably did this with the sword’s sheath.”

Astrid looked at the direction where Duke and Leti walked.

I wish I had the chance to fight these men with Duke-senpai.

But Astrid had no way of knowing that Leti was the one who rendered these two men unconscious, so it would never cross his mind to wonder how she defeated them without any weapon on her to make those red marks, as if from a sword’s sheath.

A nostalgic scent was swept by the wind, calling out one of Astrid’s buried memories and stopping his movement momentarily as he inspected the unconscious men.

“Which one of them is *him*?”

As soon as those words came out of his lips, Astrid – the speaker himself – wondered about the meaning behind those words.

Leti had a high reputation as the perfect model princess. That was true until she was announced as the heir to the throne, and her reputation dropped down to the leftover princess. This was true, even to her father, the current king of Sommevesle.

The leftover princess, who suddenly became the successor, should be groomed and taught about subjects necessary to become a ruler, including politics, law and history. To do that, the king assigned the top scholars in the kingdom to be her masters. That part of the plan was fine until then; Leti also liked to assure her father that she was giving her time and effort to improve herself, so she attended her classes diligently. However...

“Princess Leticia, Prince Leonhardt has come.”

“Let him in.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

The history master her father assigned to her was none other than her younger brother, Prince Leonhardt.

Leonhardt Zur Kreutzer was the third prince and the fourth child of the king. He was known as “The Genius Historian, fourth child of the king and the third prince”—also known as a weird and

eccentric person. Most thought that this reputation, which he also used as his self-introduction, was the perfect description of him.

Leonhardt greeted Leti cheerfully. He, among all of the king's children who were all already known as eccentric, sparkled as the oddest ball in the lot.

“Good morning, Ane’ue²! You seem to be in a good... I mean, not so good mood today! *Hahaha...* The story, or rather the rumor, about Baron Barchet’s son rejecting you has spread in the castle like wild fire, you know? *Fufufu...*”

If Leonhardt would only groom himself up even just a little, he would be branded as handsome as his sister. Together with Leti, they would be known as beautiful siblings, sharing the same blonde hair and steel blue eyes. But that was all wishful thinking, as Prince Leonhardt cared not a single cent about his appearance. He was wearing a shabby white coat as a jacket and a pair of glasses that strangely reflected light too strongly enough to cloud the glasses itself. His manner of speaking also maximized his lungs’ capacity to the fullest without caring to whom he was speaking with. These characteristics wasted his handsome face, and he enjoyed the people’s disappointment.

“I do not mind if it spreads like wildfire. It should spread enough to reach the houses of the noble families lest it will be a problem for me. That way I can ward off those who wanted to

² Ane’ue: A Japanese honorific for calling one’s older sister. (More formal and old-fashioned than the normal *Onee-san*)

have Duke as a knight for their daughters. They would not want to get Princess Leticia's favorite knight, would they?"

The reason why Leti dressed up glamorously when she invited Duke to be her knight despite knowing it was out of place was to have people talk and gossip about it. If this story had even reached her brother, who was normally ignorant about these kinds of things, then her plan was a success.

"I chose Duke Barchet because I thought he was the best one among the rejects, but he was better than I expected... But enough about me and my knights. Tell me, what are those papers? Do not tell me, you have decided to be a teacher for real?"

Leonhardt brought with him a small chalkboard, a stack of paper, and a single book.

"This is a history book, though its contents are more of bedtime stories, *bababa*. Then, these papers are from Friedhelm-ani'ue³. I met him on my way here. Here you go."

Leti took the history book and placed it on her desk. Then she took a sheet from the stack of paper and crumpled it into a ball after glancing at it for a second.

"He really does not know when to give up...!"

"What is it? Lemme see?!"

³ Ani'ue. A Japanese honorific referring to one's older brother (More formal and old fashioned than the normal *Onii-san*)

Leonhardt dumped the papers on the desk, then picked up and straightened the piece of paper Leti had just crumpled. On the paper was a portrait of a man and his personal information, such as the name and family lineage. Leonhardt soon understood that the papers were of a husband candidate for Leti.

“Why, isn’t he a good-looking chap? But you cannot trust portrait artists to draw exactly how the models look like or they might lose their profession *ahaba!* Hey ane’ue, doesn’t he look a bit like Friedhelm-ani’ue?”

“Are they not related? I mean he is from the Friedhelm faction.”

Leonhardt continued to press the issue like he was selling something. He kept on telling Leti the good points of the man, like his good social status and that he was too good a catch to let go, et cetera. He spoke like this topic was not wholly connected to *his* sister. He was Leti's only full brother, yet he only saw the situation as amusing and made fun of it.

“Silence. You are the last person I want to talk about marriage; you *are* single yourself. Better just use that mouth of yours to talk about your research. You make more sense when you do.”

“Yes...yes... shall we start our lesson?” Leonhardt declared, and wrote something on the chalkboard he brought with him. Leti thought that his eccentric personality was represented clearly by his peculiar handwriting, which rose upward to the right.

“Our first topic is about Sommevesle’s first king, the Knight King Christian. It is also not clear whether he really existed or not, right?”

The founding king of the kingdom felt more like a legend than an ancestor. Sommevesle’s children were raised hearing King Christian’s adventures as bedtime stories.

“The world of man was in chaos due to Evil. One god named Christian descended from the heavens and transformed a part of god’s power into swords and granted these swords to man. So Christian with his 12 disciples defeated Evil and founded the Kingdom of Sommevesle. This kind of legend of origin can easily be found in any country, right?”

Leonhardt gestured at the board with his pointing stick and traced the name written on the board.

“I already know that.”

“*Ahaha*. Of course you do. I forgot about that. If you were born and raised in Sommevesle, you should have heard about this. Sorry about that. *Ahahaha*. But. Hey. Don’t you think the name given to the swords of the Knight King kind of lame? ‘The Knight’s Swords’ is not really creative. Or is it just me?”

Leonhardt wrote with his right hand ‘the Knight’s Swords’ on the board.

“I had the same opinion... So? I also happen to know that already.”

“*Ahahaha*. Yeah, you’re right. Then the god’s power was divided into twelve swords known as the ‘Promised Swords’ and given to the twelve knights who swore loyalty to King Christian. They held their military meetings over a round table where everyone is equal and can freely share the opinions. This practice continued to be passed on until it became a tradition that is continued on today. This is where “the Knights of the Round” is believed to be originated. But the stories after that are blurry and feel more like to be fiction. Why? Because old Knight King’s Sword was preserved, even though it is old and is stored as a national treasure, but not even one of the twelve Promised Swords were left.”

“How many times do I have to say it to you? I *already* know that... *argh!* This is a waste, a total waste of my time. Why must I take the lectures of my younger brother? Moreover, the lesson is about a fairy tale told to every child in the kingdom when it is time to go to bed!” Leti exploded. She could no longer take any more of the stupid lesson while Leonhardt continued to write on the board, and laughingly said that there was nothing Leti could do about it.

“Our father, the honorable king, was the one who decided to select you as his heir to prevent a civil war between the factions of the first and second princes. So he thought that he had to groom you in becoming a ruler.

I said that I met our eldest brother a while ago right? I properly greeted him. I said, ‘How are you doing, Prince-that-will-divide-the-kingdom-into-two? Are you enjoying your day filled with thrill knowing the other has sent assassins targeting your life?’”

“As for me, I am enjoying the perfect day. Ever since it was announced that I will succeed the throne, their competition has somehow cooled down, giving me a respite from it.”

“Scary!” Leonhardt blurted out as he shrugged his shoulders. For her brothers who do not consider her as a sister, Leti simply returned their sentiments and did not think of them as her brothers either.

“And since we’re at it, let’s talk about this *important* thing for a king of this Kingdom.”

Leonhardt wrote *Knights of the Round* on the board.

“For your information, Father particularly emphasized that this is the one topic that I should discuss thoroughly with you. But I know you have already tired of this topic, so I’ll say this quickly.”

“Yes. Please do. At three times your normal speed.”

When Leti was a child, she was told that there was no need for her to study history, law, political science and the ways of a ruler because the throne would definitely be succeeded by either of her elder brothers. But Leti still studied all of these, so these classes her father asked her to take were really unnecessary. However, in

order to appease her father, who thought she needed them, she had no choice but to come and attend.

“Okay, let’s start with the question, ‘What is a knight?’ *Knights draw their swords only to protect the Kingdom.* This is the motto of our Royal Chivalric Order; their swords are to protect and not to hurt. But if you look at it from the enemy’s perspective, they *are* getting hurt, right? *Hahaha.* But I think saying that they protect all of Sommevesle is a bit far-fetched, don’t you think? So, just as there are kings who dream of world peace and yet simply care for the safety of his family, the idealistic aim of many knights is to serve the country, and their realistic goal is to vow loyalty and swear their allegiance to their chosen master.”

There were several honorary chivalric orders around the kingdom. Two of the most famous ones were the Seventh Heaven of Prince Friedhelm and the Valkyrie of Prince Guido. But the most famous and most prestigious of all chivalric orders was the Order of the King, the Knights of the Round.

Leonhardt drew a circle around the words *Knights of the Round* to emphasize his point.

“Our older brothers Friedhelm and Guido both created their own private chivalric orders in preparation for their ascension to the throne, right? They might have even thought to complete all twelve when they became the King. But they were pleasantly disappointed!”

Both of the princes had gathered skillful knights to their Orders, so that making them Knights of the Round would not bring shame to the name. Leti had been relieved because of this fact, but with the way things were now, the situation was just frustrating.

“Then on the coronation ceremony of the King... Oh, right! When will your coronation ceremony be?”

“The earliest might be in a few years. Father seemed to be thinking of establishing a stable Queen Leticia administration while he is still healthy and can still control our two older brothers.”

If Leti happened to ascend the throne because of her father’s death, there was a high possibility that her two brothers or their supporters would attack the newly established administration. So Leti was indeed grateful for the King’s intention of letting her take over the crown while he could still act as her guardian.

“I see. During that coronation ceremony, each one of your Knights of the Round will take their stand in front of the pillars in the throne room when you take your oath as the ruler of the kingdom. There are twelve pillars, and you should have twelve knights by that time. Completing the twelve knights is your current mission, but until that day, will you ...”

Leonhardt questioningly looked at Leti – stilling his gaze on her in the middle of his ramblings made him look a little scary.

“...be able to do it? *Ahabaha!*”

“Of course I can. I will get twelve knights and none of them will be less than worthy of the title.”

Leti's eyes sparkled, her eyes oozing with determination. In contrast was Leonhardt, who folded his arms and nodded in thought.

“But I think this is where you have to compromise, Ane’ue. All of the good knights are either in Seventh Heaven or in Valkyrie already.”

“In this kind of situation, I do not care even if I have to steal them. Or maybe it will be more interesting if I just make our two older brothers my knights?”

Leti knew that she would inherit the throne. But that was it. She did not know what kind of a ruler would she be, and that uncertainty had poked her on the side so much recently that it already hurt.

Leti's first task as the heir to the crown was to gather twelve knights to fill in all the seats in her Knights of the Round. She had decided that she would only get the best of best. A half-hearted Knights of the Round was only fit for the Leftover Princess and not the queen she wanted to be.

“I recommend the commoner but talented rookie, Astrid Ga— *waaah!*”

Leti threw the history book at the babbling Leonhardt, cutting him off. Then she graciously grabbed and flipped the hem of her dress and walked out of the room.

“Ane’ue?”

“I shall go and court again the Leftover Princess’ lover. Listening to you made me realize that I should hurry up. So for that point, today’s lecture had meaning.”

Leti left Leonhardt in her room. Three guards then prepared to follow her as her escorts but she waved them off to leave her alone. The guards were perplexed for a moment, and Leti used this opportunity to run away and go to the Royal Chivalric Order’s Camp.

The knights were startled when they saw Leti walking into their camp. Some could not even prevent themselves and started whispering with each other. Leti was not bothered with their useless gossip and simply continued to walk on towards her target.

“... Why, if it isn’t the next queen, a good day, Your Highness.”

Leti's target was, of course, Duke Barchet. Duke’s expression clearly showed that Leti was just a pain and he wanted her to give up on him already. But when he noticed that she did not have any guards with her, he immediately scanned the surroundings.

“Your Highness, what happened to your guards?”

Leti became the heir to throne by overtaking her two older brothers. It is obvious to everyone that until she became queen—no, even she had ascended the throne, her life would be in constant danger. But despite that, Leti was again outside, alone without any guards, and Duke was alarmed for her.

Oi, oi, oi, what is her guards doing, letting her wander off again alone like yesterday!?

“...Oh, yes. It is dangerous for me to be alone. I know that, but I have some business to do in the inner room. What shall I do?”

Leti did not stop in her steps and continued to walk towards the inner room.

“Don’t move! I’ll get someone to escort you!”

“You are addressing me again in a casual manner. Repeat. Yesterday is already over.”

“...Please stay where you are, Your Highness. I shall call someone to accompany you.”

But Leti did not lend an ear to Duke’s words and proceeded to go further into the hall, so Duke was left with no choice but to be Leti's escort.

Tsk tsk. Darn it. This woman left her guards on purpose to make me follow her!

Duke scanned the area, hoping to meet someone's eye, but every one of the knights in the camp averted his gaze away from him. If only his junior Astrid—who idolized the princess—were here, he would have passed this task to him, but unfortunately he was nowhere in sight.

“Princess! Your Highness!”

“*Shhh!* This is no longer the Order's Camp, so will you keep quiet?”

Duke clicked his tongue one last time and gave in to his fate. He followed Leti wherever she intended to go, realizing that he had just fallen perfectly in her trap.

I can't simply abandon her. It's not like we're totally unrelated. I fully understand that this Leftover Princess has the difficult task of keeping her neutral stance. I of all people, truly understand that feeling.

Leti continued to walk deeper down the hall, feeling grateful for Duke's innate kindness. Then she stopped upon reaching a hall that stretched for some distance, the Gallery of Kings.

“This is where the portraits of the kings are placed. This is the first king, the ‘Knight King Christian.’”

Duke saw the portraits of the Kings lined up and arranged on the walls for the first time. The way the portraits were painted varied per time period, and he was so amazed by the paintings that he stared at them quite seriously.

“The twelfth king, Lion King Alexander and beside him, the thirteenth king, Revolution King Julius. King Julius killed his master, Lion King Alexander, and he never justified what he did. He had his portrait painted with him holding the crown instead of wearing it to tell the future people that this crown was never his.”

“Such a story would make one wonder why he started the revolution in the first place.”

“Who knows? Even the Lion King himself did not know the reason, so how would I know?”

“You sounded like you’ve asked him directly. Is he your acquaintance?”

Leti did not reply to Duke’s banter and simply took a few steps forward, then stopped.

“Lion King Alexander never lost a single battle during his reign. In contrast to that, the eighteenth king, Administrative King Karlheinz, never waged a war or started a single battle with other countries. King Karlheinz, together with his Queen, rebuilt the country that was turned into rubble because of the war. They focused on internal reform and diplomacy. He was truly a wise monarch. The idiom “fifty-five bows” came from him.”

“Was that about him bowing fifty-five times in asking someone to be his knight?”

“Yes, that is it. How about you? How many more times shall I bow my head before you agree to become my knight?”

“...Have you ever bowed your head down to me? I don’t remember seeing you bow down yesterday or even the day before that.” Duke unwittingly retorted to Leti’s statement, and she just replied, “Is that so?” and continued to walk on. She stopped in front of an empty space where no portraits adorned the wall.

“My painting will be placed here. I wonder what my title would be.”

“I pray that it will not be a bad name.”

Leti uttered the same prayer in her heart.

What kind of a ruler will I be? What posthumous title will they give me? Will I be known as a wise monarch like the past and future reincarnations of the Knight King? These were Leti’s fears, which came from the fact that she knew herself perfectly – that she could not win against her two older brothers when it came to having the qualities and disposition perfect for a king.

“The face of the Lion King Alexander, the abilities of Administrator King Karlheinz, and the personality of One-handed King Oswald.”

“Ha?” Duke said, not understanding the meaning behind Leti’s words.

“The traits of my ideal man.”

If Leti told this to anyone, many would take it as a joke to mean that her standards were high that she could not find a man to like or that she had no need for a husband. Duke was starting to think that way, but he noticed the true meaning behind her words upon seeing her stern profile.

“*Aah*, I see. Your ideal king. But I do not know who the One-handed King is.”

Duke noticed the truth behind Leti's joke. As she gazed at the portraits, he saw envy, jealousy, and self-doubt reflected in her eyes. He suddenly remembered Leti's age—she was but a girl who had turned seventeen the previous month. For a twenty-three year old man like him, Leti was just a child. Yet the way this princess confidently stood with her back perfectly straight made one forget that she, this young lady, carried a heavy responsibility on her shoulders.

“No, they are my *rivals*.”

“Yes, yes, rivals...right. Rivals.”

“They really are rivals. You do understand that, do you not?”

Leti was unusually irritated. The reason was probably because Duke was able to see through her and read her true feelings. She indignantly turned her back on Duke, who was saying his condescending agreement, and she walked eight steps deeper into the room.

“The portrait of One-handed King Oswald will be placed here, and a little bit further will be the portrait of the Heart-broken King Ludgar. It seems that he and the succeeding kings are no longer directly descended from my line.”

“Huh?”

“We are going to the Knight King’s Space. Follow me.”

Leti ignored Duke’s questioning look and continued to walk deeper into the hallway and stopped on a spot where the walls continue endlessly.

“This is the Knight King’s Space.”

“...Hmmm, but I only see walls here. Is it something that can only be seen by the royal family?”

“What do you mean? This is just a wall.”

Leti did not say outright ‘are you stupid?’ but her attitude and tone says otherwise. Before Duke could even ask his question of why she was showing him a wall, Leti spoke.

“The Knight King’s Space is a room with no doors. That is why no one can enter it.”

“You mean like a hidden room?”

“Not really.”

The Knight King's Space did not even serve the purpose of an emergency shelter. It was simply a structure surrounded by walls all around. Duke knocked at the wall several times and wondered what the room was really for.

“Does making a room like that have any meaning?”

“From what I heard, the Knight King Christian had the room made. Shall I ask him if ever we meet? I would also like to know the reason.”

“Yes, *please* do... the interior, I think it is hollow judging from the sound, but it doesn't sound like it was filled in by rocks or stones so I guess it really is a *room*.”

Duke thought that maybe it had been enclosed by walls accidentally when it was built when Leti started to speak and pointed at it.

“Embroidered on the carpet is the story of the gods, framed with golden ears of grain, and on the ceiling hangs a wooden chandelier – the kind no longer seen around here. On floor, above the carpet, is a patina oak table. Chairs created out of the same wood are scattered around the room. All of the furnishings are adorned by carvings so beautiful, they could be masterpieces of art. They are like gems, priceless in their rarity and beauty.”

“...Have you seen the inside of the room?”

“How could I, when there are no existing documents or paintings depicting it?”

“But your description was rather detailed and...”

“I have always been told that I have a very vivid imagination.”

Leti finished her business in the Gallery of Kings and proceeded to walk out of the room. Duke followed behind her, sighing loudly enough for Leti to hear. He wanted to ask sarcastically if she was done and satisfied, but swallowed back his words. He decided not to voice them, as he could still remember Leti's stern face as she looked at the Kings' portraits.

Leti would be a queen. Not feeling anxious, scared or worried was far stranger. Going to the Gallery of Kings to sort out her feelings and thoughts while surrounded by the kings she idolized so much was just a natural thing for someone like her to do.

“My stroll ends here. I am going back. Come with me and have some refreshments as thanks for escorting me.”

“I will go with you and send you back to the castle. But I will pass on the refreshments. Thank you for the offer.”

“Just go inside and drink tea. I do not want any weird rumors going around saying that I do not treat my visitors well.”

Duke, once again, swallowed back his retort that her offer was really for herself and not his. He repeated in his mind that he was

the adult here and silently followed Leti. Upon seeing Leti return, her guards hurriedly went to her, followed by her maid.

“Princess! We’re glad you’re safe!”

“Yes, I am. The knight behind me served as my escort. Prepare tea in the summerhouse.”

Leti gave her orders to the maid and then ordered her guards to stay outside.

In the summerhouse, the expensive-looking tea set prepared for them was placed on an elegant table with matching chairs. Duke was so nervous thinking what he would do if he, a son of a poor and lowly baron, spilled tea or snacks on the immaculately white lace tablecloth.

“I would like to say relax and take your time, but my older brother shall come here in a while. But you can stay if you want to listen to a siblings’ squabble.”

The maid poured tea into the cup and silently placed it in front of them. The maid, who was either thoroughly trained by Leti or knew her master well, left the two of them alone and went out of the room even without an order from Leti.

“May I ask you something? You are the eldest son of a baron, right? So why did you enter the Knight Academy and become a knight in the Royal Chivalric Order? Perhaps you have a dire financial need?”

“If I say I have?”

“Then I would use that chance to make you owe me. I will pay your family’s debt and make you bow down your head to me. So you really need not be troubled about it.”

“Of course I’ll be troubled!” *With what you were planning to do!*

It was not unusual for nobles to join the Order. Those who joined were normally the younger sons, who would not inherit the title, or those who would like to add prestige in their name before marriage. However, eldest sons like Duke—who would succeed the title—were rare.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you but we’re not in debt. I am just a man trying to be the man I wanna be. But I’m sure, Your Highness will not understand...”

Duke did not expect to see a surprised reaction from Leti. He thought that she would answer him with one of her witticisms.

“...Hmmm... I see. So what are you planning now?”

“Planning to do what?”

“Planning to do with your future. The competition for the throne is finished for now, so there is no need for you to stay on neutral ground. Do you have plans on joining Seventh Heaven?”

“The competition indeed has settled for now but the battle for political power still remains. So in the end, the rivalry between the Prince Friedhelm and Prince Guido factions is not yet over.”

Leti was chosen to be the heir to the crown, the next queen, but up until now, the next queen had yet to decide who her king would be. So it was natural that there were those nobles thinking of making their sons her husband, and then would control the Queen Leticia administration as their puppet government.

“I see your head does not only have swords in it. I do not see my stupid brothers giving up soon. They keep on sending me portraits for my husband candidates, and I can soon fill a treasure room with those.”

“That is...quite...something.”

“Would you like to take a look? You can get any that catches your fancy.”

“I will pass on that. I do not have the hobby of decorating my room with portraits of men.”

“I see.”

Leti elegantly brought the cup to her lips and took a sip of her tea without even making a sound. Then she suddenly stood up.

“What’s wro—?”

Before Duke could finish his question, his trained eyes saw Leti grab a spoon and throw it across to him when he was about to drink the tea, and with the impact of the spoon, his teacup split into pieces, spilling the liquid inside it onto the white tablecloth. Duke was already panicking, thinking of the damage this would cost him, and shouted at Leti.

“Oi! What do you think you’re do—”

“...Poison. You have not drunk it yet, right?”

“Not yet, but didn’t you already—!?”

“You are speaking casually again. I have immunity against poisons. All I need is a bit of rest and...”

Duke immediately went to Leti's side, knocking off the chair in the process. He knelt beside Leti to check on her.

“Just quit talking. I’ll call a doctor.”

“...I...am...really...fine...so...keep...quiet...”

Duke carried Leti, whose face suddenly turned blue and her breathing became faster.

My first priority is to search for help.

“Oi! Somebody call a doctor! Princess Leticia was poisoned!”

Duke’s voice echoed in Leti's ears. She repeated that she was just fine, but her words did not leave her lips.



“Anything wrong? Your face doesn’t look good.”

“Ah, I see. I lost consciousness. I think I was poisoned.”

Leti went to the Knight King’s Space unconsciously. Lion King Alexander and Administrative King Karlheinz were present.

“Out of the 12 swords, minus the Knight Sword, never ever grant to anyone the Earth Sword that heals and the Steel Sword that protects your body from attacks.” King Alexander gave Leti this advice with a sluggish smile, as he was feeling irritated himself.

“Did you do that?”

“Oh, yes I did. That is the reason why we, the reincarnations of Knight King Christian, can leave such amazing achievements compared to other kings. If you have the Earth Sword, you can neutralize most poisons, and if you have the Steel Sword, a slash from a sword will simply be a shallow cut on you.”

“I see. But according to history, you will be soon killed by your Prime Minister, will you not?”

“Yeah. I wonder how he will kill me...”

King Alexander had already accepted his fated death and even said he was looking forward to it. Leti looked around the room with her arms folded across her chest.

The wall was lined with a tapestry of charms for fairies. The carpet had the story of gods, multiple gods that Leti found it hard to believe, as their religion now was monotheist – with only one god. This space, this room, is really different from her time.

“What was Knight King Christian thinking when he created this room? If he created this room for a place to gather his reincarnations, then why have we not seen him here even once?”

“...Maybe, maybe he just wanted an escape... just like us?” Administrator King Karlheinz suggested in response to Leti’s question.

“I have come to think that maybe he *is* here, only that we cannot see him.”

The Knight King’s Space was a place for the kings to think of the *what-ifs* in their lives.

What if King Alexander threw away the crown and abandoned the country? Would his life have been saved? Would he have lived?

What if King Karlheinz threw away the crown and went after his wife? Would they have had the chance to go back to the way things were? Would they have a peaceful life together as husband wife?

And what if Leti would not be a good king? Would have it been better if her brothers, who were more suited to be kings, were the ones who inherited the crown?

The kings could freely show their weaknesses in this space, where the only witnesses would be the other reincarnations of the Knight King, who all lived in different times and would never cross paths.

“*Hmm?*”

Leti thought she heard someone calling her and turned around looking for the voice, but there was no one there because the voice she heard was not from this space but from her *reality*.

“I will go now. Someone is calling me.”

That noisy voice is calling me. I guess it is time to wake up.

And Leti left the Knight King’s Space.



“Princess Leticia!”

Leti frowned at the low but noisy voice calling out her name by her ears. Even a cool, baritone voice could be deadly weapon for someone not in their top condition.

“‘With a sword on my right and a shield on my left, I swear my allegiance to you until the day I die.’ If you say that, I will get up,” said Leti to Duke, while she was still lying in bed with her eyes closed. The words that Leti recited were from the Knight’s Oath. In other words, she was asking Duke to be her knight in order for her to wake up.

“I see you’re already fine since you can already say that much. I shall take my leave now.”

“—now. What time is it now? I see the sun has already set but...”

“Yes. The sun has set for the third time since you were poisoned. It has been three days already.”

Leti suddenly stood up upon hearing how long she had passed out. But the sudden movement and recent lack of it made her dizzy, and she stumbled back in bed. Judging it impossible to stand up straight in a spinning world, she gave up and simply sat on her bed.

“What do you mean three days?”

“Oi, don’t push yourself. Lie down.”

“Too casual.”

“Umm... PLEASE LIE DOWN, YOUR HIGHNESS. You know, you’ve just crossed the line between life and death yesterday.”

“It was a strong poison then. You would have died on the spot if you were the one who drank it. I am glad I stopped you on time.”

When Leti drank the tea, she felt a shock run through her body and her tongue go numb. She did know that she would not die because of poison, but no one said it would not be painful. So this incident taught her a lesson, and she reflected that she would be more careful next time.

“So how are things now? Was the perpetrator caught?”

“Prince Leonhardt asked me to be your guard. He is the one leading the investigation in coordination with the Royal Chivalric Order...but from what I heard, they could not get any information from the maid no matter how hard they pressed her. Finding the real culprit might be difficult.”

Leti sighed in relief upon hearing Duke's report.

“I see. It is better not to find the real culprit.”

Duke was surprised with this reply. He had prepared himself for a bashing of the Order's incompetence, so Leti's unexpected answer confused him.

“Wouldn't it better if the culprit was caught? It'd guarantee your safety.”

“No. Think. Who would be the prime suspects for this case? Prince Friedhelm and Prince Guido. Now, if decisive evidence

comes up against either one of them, then the political balance I have created will crumble.”

“Political balance?”

“My two brothers should continue on keeping each other in check lest I find myself in less favorable situation. If either one of them gets lost in the picture, then the country would be divided between myself and the one who remains. The three of us have to keep this balance until the day we die. Keeping the kingdom’s peace is more important than catching the culprit. Besides, will this not be better for you as well? You are Prince Friedhelm’s friend, after all.”

Duke agreed that what Leti said was true. He would not want his friend to be the suspect for Leti’s attempted murder.

“But...what about your feelings? You might have been killed by your brother, you know?”

Leti had spoken about prioritizing the kingdom with a calm face even though she had just woken up. But Duke already knew. He already knew that Leti was not only just a perfect princess—he knew that beyond her perfectly calm façade, there were more sides to her.

“Our warm filial relationship ended when I was nine, and for the last eight years, all we’ve had is a cold sibling relationship. I do not wish for us to go back to the time when we were young children.”

Leti's tone suggested that this topic was over and that it was time to discuss other things.

“Putting that aside, my apologies for dragging you into this. I am sure it was not a pleasant experience being a suspect.”

“Well, it couldn’t be helped. I was in a position screaming to be a suspect anyway.”

When Leti collapsed because of the poisoned tea, Leonhardt suspected Duke right off the bat. Duke was Friedhelm’s friend and his family was under Guido’s faction. It would have been no wonder if he had been asked by either to do such a thing.

“You don’t have to worry about me. Worry about yourself. Are you—?”

“Worried about me? I appreciate the feelings. Could you relay a message for me? Tell Leon to come here and that if anyone else comes inside, I will kill him.”

“Brutal now, are we?”

“Not me, them. Anyway, sorry for making you stay as my bodyguard. I know you also have your own job. I shall give my thanks formally later.”

Leti closed all discussions and pressed Duke to leave, but he had one last thing to ask. “It was a spoon, right? The one you threw at me.”

“Yes. What else did you see it as, a fork?”

Duke was not convinced with her answer, but he was confused when he was questioned back. He did see Leti throw a spoon, but it felt like it was something sharper.

“...Will a teacup break because of a spoon hitting it?”

“If the cup already has a crack, then it can be broken even with bare hands, right?”

Leti waved her hand, dismissing Duke. But Duke hesitated to leave because of two reasons. One, he wanted to ask further about the spoon-breaking-teacup incident, and two, he felt it was too cold to simply leave after literally completing the task given to him of guarding Leti until she woke up. In the end, he chose to throw those thoughts aside and left Leti's room.

After walking a few steps, Duke looked back at the closed door leading to Leti's room. He noticed that there was a part of him confused on what he should do next.

Where exactly do I stand now?

Duke was supposed to be in the middle, in a neutral ground where he was Friedhelm's friend, and his family under Guido's faction—though personally, he was pro-Friedhelm. And yet he was looking at this incident from Leti's perspective. He immediately worried about her being nearly killed by her brothers without even having second thoughts about suspecting Friedhelm.

A life was just saved right in front of your eyes. Of course it's natural for you to feel worried about her. It's just natural.

Duke rationalized his feelings in his head, convincing himself that it was still too early for him to recognize the change of heart budding inside him.

“How is Ane’ue?”

Leonhardt found Duke even before Duke could find him. Both of them looked dreadful since they both had not had any decent sleep ever since the incident.

When Leonhardt put on his serious face, it was apparent that he and Leti were siblings. He normally wore a shabby coat and highly reflective eyeglasses, and had a mouth that spoke quickly about his researches and findings. But when his face was stoic and he had his glasses off, he was obviously a handsome young man.

“Prince Leonhardt, Her Highness has sent me to fetch you and not to let anyone else inside her room.”

“Is that so~? Well, you may take your leave now as her guard. Be careful on your way home~!” Once he opened his mouth, he was back to how he originally was. He took out his handkerchief and waved it at Duke, dismissing him of his duty.

Duke should have taken his leave when Leonhardt dismissed him. He had already completed his tasks of acting as Leti's guard and calling Leonhardt, but his body would not move.

“Oh...oh... are you not going home? But you have to. The suspicion against you is yet to be cleared, you know.”

Leonhardt looked at Duke with such piercing eyes, Duke felt like he was penetrating inside him. Then Leonhardt smiled.

“If you want to stay, you better be Ane’ue’s Knight.”

“—I do not have any plans on doing so. Please excuse me.” Duke made his refusal clear, turned on his heel, and took his leave. Leonhardt’s face broke into a grin as he watched Duke walk away.

“*Hmmm...ababa...* This might not be as hopeless as I thought it would be.”

Leonhardt had heard stories about Duke Barchet, so he thought that he would be a lost cause, but that did not seem to be the case any longer. Leonhardt entered Leti’s room while humming a song.

After listening to Leonhardt’s report and giving him instructions, Leti went back to sleep once more. When she woke up suddenly, she heard a knock on the door.

“Who is it?”

It could be a maid checking on her or some other brother or sister to visit her... or maybe an unwanted visitor. Leti

concentrated on her right hand. The person who came in was indeed an unwanted visitor, but also another sibling.

“Yo! You okay... of course not... but you seem to be fine.”

Leti threw a pillow at his face as soon as he entered the room, but they had been together for so long that her older brother Friedhelm did not have any difficulty catching the pillow and throwing it back at her.

“Where are your manners? It is rude to enter a lady’s room without permission! Go out and count until two hundred then come in again!”

“Don’t worry, I won’t feel anything even if I see you in your negligee—Yes ma’am I will go out and count to two hundred.”

Friedhelm did as Leti said to escape a thick tome being thrown at him. He entered the room again after counting to two hundred, and inside he found Leti perfectly dressed and sitting comfortably on her chair.

“I wouldn’t have minded if you stayed in bed. You haven’t recovered yet, right?”

“I will be fine as long as I get some sleep. So? What is your business here?”

Friedhelm lay on his back with his legs outstretched on Leti’s couch like he was the master of the room.

“To visit the sick. What else would I come here for? Leon has been running around investigating. Of course I’ll worry that something might be up.”

Prince Friedhelm was a handsome person, though in a different way from Leti and Guido. He had flaxen hair and green eyes. He excelled in martial arts and was a generous man. He had charisma that could charm many people, and knights were not the only type of people to swear loyalty to him. To add to that, all of the members of Seventh Heaven were first-rate people.

No matter how anyone looks at him, it is evident that he is much more suited to be a king than I do. How irritating! Leti snorted as she poured into the depths of her heart her irrational irritation.

“Visiting the sick is just for show, right? What is your real purpose? I only have water to offer you.”

Leti poured water into the goblet and offered it to Friedhelm. He accepted Leti's offer and drank the water as if it was an expensive wine.

“Well, I heard that you were *courting* a certain friend of mine. So I wanted to confirm it with you.”

“The rumors are true. I am currently enticing Duke Barchet to take the First Seat in my Knights of the Round. And since you are here, I would also like to ask for around four knights from your Seventh Heaven. Tell me when you feel like giving them away.

Friedhelm found the situation interesting. He placed the water goblet on the table and stood up, walking towards Leti.

“...How...How did you *know*?”

“Know what?”

“You used to say ‘I want to be with Onii-sama⁴! I will study with him!’ You were very cute then...”

Bringing up an old story that was a decade old only added to Leti's irritation. She wondered why her still young twenty-three year old brother seemed to remember the mundane things and forget the essential ones as he got older.

“You wanted to study everything, from the ways of the monarch to history and law, and the masters did teach you when

⁴ *Onii-sama*: A formal honorific to call one's older brother. (Onii mans older brother and –sama is an honorific to show respect)



they felt like it. I only thought that you were a cute little sister trying to copy her brother, but looking back at it now, it seems like you already knew you'd be queen way back then."

Friedhelm cornered Leti in her seat. He placed one of his hands on the chair's handle and the other on the backrest. Leti still had not yet fully recovered and could not move as she pleased, so she took a deep breath and replied like she was scolding a naughty child.

"Of course I did not. I had not even thought about it in my wildest imagination."

"It's not only about you studying. You had kept a completely neutral stand on the competition going on about me and Guido, saying that you didn't want to add to the turmoil that might split the kingdom. In the process, you created a third faction, *your* faction, the neutrals, where the majority of the other royal children belong – even my own full brother and sisters. I couldn't help but think you've already been creating and strengthening your foothold on the throne right from the start."

Everything that Friedhelm said was true. Leti had already known since she was a child that she would inherit the throne through the Knight King's Space. It had taken some time before she fully accepted the fact, but after that, she did everything within her power to make the necessary preparations. It was true that she pretended to be a peace-loving princess that hated conflict and

stayed neutral. This brought her other siblings, except for Friedhelm and Guido, to her side.

“It is all a coincidence.”

“Really? Why do you seem to be so calm about it? I never saw you feel lost or confused about the whole thing, suddenly being proclaimed as the next queen and all.”

“I only seem to be so. One can never know what other people truly feel inside.”

Leti rebutted in her thoughts, *‘Who in the right mind would show their weakness to other people?’* Then she remembered that one time in the Kings’ Gallery where Duke saw through her. Her musings were cut by Friedhelm’s voice.

“Then don’t you think it is time for you to show what’s inside your heart?”

“I do not understand what you want from me.”

“Tell me the truth. Tell me, who did you think was better suited to be a king? Me or Guido? I know you had your reasons why you had to stay neutral, just like Duke. But not having a preference is all just a front. Tell me, who it is?”

Leti was not able to read Friedhelm’s intention, so she gave a safe answer.

“Leonhardt. He is my full brother and son of the First Queen, after all.”

Friedhelm’s face changed from being dead serious to that of a sulking child, a trickster’s face that many fall for.

“Yeah, you’re right. It was supposed to be Leonhardt, had he not ended up like that, then...”

There was a reason why Sommevesle’s line of succession to the throne had become this complicated.

The King of Sommevesle was allowed to take up to three Queen Consorts to prevent not having any heir. Since a child had not been born between the current King and the First Queen Consort for some time, the King decided to take in his Second and Third Queen Consorts at the same time. Shortly afterward, the Third Queen Consort conceived the first child, Friedhelm, then the Second Queen Consort got pregnant with the second child, Guido, and in all irony, the First Queen Consort gave birth to the third child, Leticia, and fourth child, Leonhardt.

Should the proper order in succession be followed, the rightful heir is neither Friedhelm nor Guido but Leonhardt. But with how Leonhardt turned out, they were not convinced about him being the king, so from there it was easy for them to see Leticia as a candidate. That was where things stood now.

“This crown was just a leftover from the three princes, right? Now that I have answered all of your questions and satisfied your

curiosity, will you bring with you all of those portraits of husband candidates you had sent to me? I refuse all of them.”

Leti drove Friedhelm out of her room with this request. But despite her refusals, he just kept sending a new batch every time she returned the previous one. If Duke were to be asked, the persistence of these two was good proof that they were siblings.

“I already filtered these, so these are all handsome men who probably have good personalities. What’s your type, then?”

“The face of Lion King Alexander, the abilities of Administrative King Karlheinz, and the personality of One-handed King Oswald. If there is a man like that, I will not mind marrying him. ”

“...What you said means that you won’t marry, you know? And who’s King Oswald?” Friedhelm wondered curiously. It was the first time he heard the name, but he decided to move on.

“Anyway, I shall take my leave now. Your face doesn’t look fine at all.”

While Friedhelm noticed that Leti had deliberately changed the topic, he decided to be the one to back off. He removed his hand from the chair and sarcastically thanked Leti for the water.

“I told you, I am fine.”

“How can a face like that be fine? Go and take a look at a mirror.” Friedhelm said, pointing to her vanity, and he proceeded to the door.

“—Things get hard once they get complicated, huh?”

“Eh?”

“It was not supposed to be like this. But we always end up wringing each other’s neck. I know that I should be the one to give way but... this is just frustratingly hard. See you ‘round.”

As Friedhelm went out of the room, Leti understood the meaning behind his words, and she held her head heavy with exhaustion.

“Aaab...jeez.”

Leti never thought that he came because he was really, truthfully worried about her. She had already given up on their relationship once, given up on the possibility for them to be on good terms with each other again.

Friedhelm, Guido and Leti used to play together when they were young. They always spent their time together with their mothers watching over them from afar. But as they grew up, Friedhelm and Guido’s relationship suddenly turned for the worse, with the competition for the crown turning their every meeting into heated collisions. The only thing Leti could do was to mediate between them and to show that she was not taking sides. So she

decided to distance herself from them, and by the time they had noticed it, they had grown far away from each other. They simply ended up interrogating the other when they met, always exchanging stride remarks.

“If that was your intention, I would have properly offered good tea and some biscuits for you...”

It was just right after the poisoning incident. Friedhelm would not have done anything rash, and Leti could have been more welcoming.

“Things become hard when they get complicated...”

I guess you are right.

It was a rare event that the two royal siblings shared the same opinion on one thing.

OKOBORE HIME TO ENTAKU NO KISHI

The Leftover Princess and the Knights of the Round

Story by: Riine Ishida

Art by: Ichiko Okiya

Brought to you by:

AQUA Scans

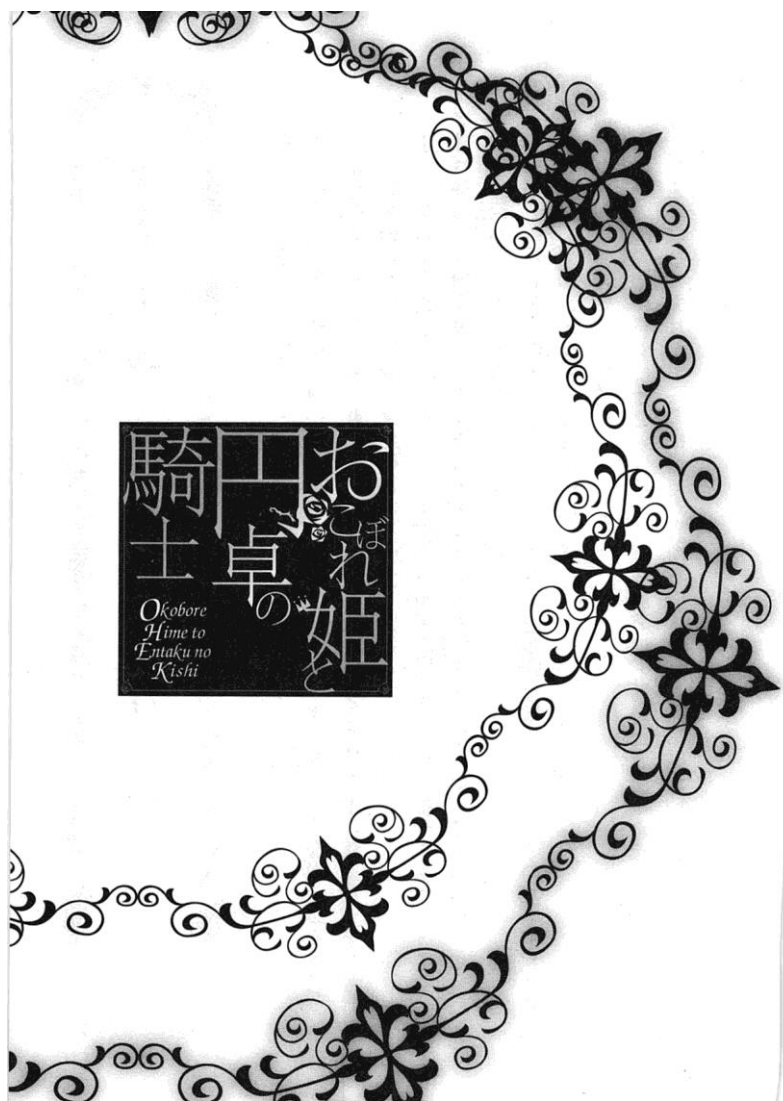
Credits

- ❖ Raws: Icarus Bride
- ❖ Translation: Crystal Hikari
- ❖ Proofreading: Fallinwind
- ❖ Quality Checking: Mizuouji

Translator's note:

The Japanese honorifics were kept in the translation of the dialogues of the characters to show the respect or adoration shown by the characters. Footnotes were provided upon the first appearance of the honorific in the chapter to explain it.

Thoughts are signified by *'italics'*.



CHAPTER II THE PRINCESS' TEA PARTY

The attempted poisoning of Princess Leticia was not made known to the public and was simply declared as a case of colds. Fabricated statements such as, “It was just a slight fever,” or “The princess was already on her way to recovery,” were intentionally leaked out to complete the story. Duke did not have the means to find out how Leti fared after he had left her, and he often found himself wondering how she was doing while unconsciously looking east, where the Royal Palace was.

“Senpai¹, has your father recovered from his cold?”

“His cold... Ah, yeah, yeah, he’s healthy now. I doubt he’ll be leaving us any time soon.”

During the three days that Leti was on the brink of life and death, Duke told a lie that he was asked to go home for a while because his father, Lord Barchet, was sick, in order to cover up for his absence while he stood as Leti's bodyguard.

‘That was close, I nearly forgot the story I made up as my excuse.’

“Ah, I heard that the Princess was sick as well.”

“So I heard, though she doesn’t seem to be one defeated by a mere cold. She’ll be fine,” Duke said with a tinge of hope, wishing that Leti was truly well. Duke was worried about her, enough for

¹ Senpai – a Japanese honorific used in addressing one’s senior

him to think that he would endure Leti's relentless invitations to be her knight if only it would make her feel better.

“Hmm... Then I won't really know which of them is...” *Death would have proven they were mere humans.* Astrid had a vague, fleeting thought and Duke did not catch what he said.

“What was that?”

“Eh? Did I say anything?”

Duke was puzzled with Astrid's reaction, so he thought it was just the wind. After dismissing the thought, his heart went back to Leti, and he even thought of asking Prince Friedhelm directly to inquire about her condition.

Just as Duke was thinking of how to get information on Leti, it came to him instead – not through reports or rumors, but through Leti herself.

“...Ah. ...Good day, I'm glad you're fine now.”

“Thank you.”

Duke had returned to the camp after being called to clean up a squabble in town. Upon his return, he saw Princess Leticia in the camp with all her elegance and grandeur like she owned the place. The other knights were staring at her from a distance, whispering of how beautiful and elegant she was, while Duke wanted to shout

“Don’t be fooled by her looks!” at them because he knew that beyond her pretty face was a woman with more guts than any knight in the Order.

“Unfortunately, I am busy and cannot stay long.”

“I understand. May I know your business then, Your Highness?”

“I came here to give an invitation.”

Leti took out from her purse a white envelope sealed with red wax and gave it to Duke. The envelope was so high class that Duke knew he’d be chastised if he tore it open with his bare hands.

“Ah, Senpai, I’ll get you a paper knife!”

Duke took the expensive-looking antique paper knife Astrid brought and carefully opened the envelope.

“Thanks.”

Duke returned the paper knife to Astrid, opened the invitation and read its contents.

“Tea party?”

“Yes, as thanks for the other day.”

Duke remembered that Leti did say she’d thank him. He appreciated Leti’s sincerity, but wearily thought that she could’ve thanked him in a different manner. A tea party hosted by the next

queen couldn't possibly be anything but grand, and he – the son of a poor baron – would definitely be a fish out of water. He could already imagine how awkward he'd be in there.

“...I'm very honored by your invitation, but please allow me to decline it. Such a gathering is too much for someone like me who has yet to even inherit the barony.”

“I was expecting you would refuse, so I just made it a small, intimate party with only my close family in attendance. It is a simple event I wished to host in order to show them that I have fully recovered. I did not want them worrying too much.”

Duke once again took a look at the elegant invitation. Strictly speaking, Duke was part of the nobility – though barely making the cut. But even if he came from a baron's family, he was not familiar with the ways of high society, such as going to the theater or tea parties.

“If you have a fiancée or a lover, you can take her with you. Once I become the queen, things will be busier, so it is best if you introduce her to me, your future master, early on.”

“Wait, wait, wait. In a broad sense you will be my master but specifically speaking you won't be...”

He really could not let his guard down around Leti, who kept on talking as if he really would be her knight in the near future. On the other hand, he wouldn't mind going to the tea party if it really was just a small family affair. Besides, it was highly likely that even

if he refused the invitation, Leti would find some way or another to drag him to it on the day itself. He decided the safest reply would be, "I'll think about it," since he'd have to leave if anything came up with the Order.

Duke escorted Leti until the camp gates, and soon after she was gone, he let out a deep, deep sigh of exhaustion and relief.

"A fiancée, huh... Guess it won't be rude even if I came without a partner. It's not an evening ball anyway."

Duke thought of asking a friend familiar with the customs of high society when realization suddenly hit him.

"Wait a second, *her* close family, meaning..."

It had slipped past him, but he just realized now that the family members of PRINCESS Leticia meant the Royal Family. Her small, intimate gathering meant only the Royal Family would be in attendance because if it were something bigger, then there'd be other peers and nobles to attend.

"...all the more I won't fit in!"

Leti had known that and deliberately used those words to make Duke think otherwise. He was such an idiot, to be tricked by Leti with such a simple play on words. Now that she was back on her feet, she immediately dragged him into something troublesome. He chided that part of himself that actually wanted to congratulate

Leti on her recovery and decided he'd better bring a companion with him to the party.

“Astrid, are you free on the day after tomorrow? Yes, you’re free so come and accompany your senior to Her Highness’ tea party.”

Of course, Duke’s primary choice for companion was his bubbly junior in the Order, Astrid, who was quite a fan of the beautiful princess. Needless to say, Astrid immediately accepted the offer.

“But is it fine for me to come? I’m just a commoner.”

“That’s exactly why I chose you. You’re a commoner and you can be my conversation partner. I doubt I’d have anyone to talk to there. We’ll go home immediately after drinking a cup of tea.”

Astrid dreamily imagined a world he could not even fathom, and the only clear image was the beautiful Princess Leticia.

“Ah! Should we bring presents? Are there rules on what to bring or not? There’s a bakeshop in town I highly recommend.”

“...When I’m with you, I feel like I’m stupid sometimes.”

It would be good if Duke could just innocently enjoy the upcoming event, but he was a serious man by nature and he could not help but worry about things.

“Wear your formal uniform. Don't forget your cape and white gloves. And polish your boots. Don't bring any speck of dust with you.”

“Yes sir! Is the cape the grey one we wore during the Induction Ceremony?”

“Yeah, that one. Is it still grey? If it's too dirty, borrow one from the others.”

“...Yes. ...I think?”

The Royal Chivalric Order had ten ranks and their ranks were shown by the color of their capes and the lines on it. So the neophytes, including Astrid, were Knights of the Tenth Rank and they had grey capes with no lines. The Commander of the Order was a knight of the First Rank and his cape was black with lines. The color got darker the higher the rank, so one could easily know it.

“They should reverse the color-coding. The younger ones have a higher tendency to dirty their capes, making the color closer to that of the Commander's.”

So here were two knights going to the same tea party: the junior with a cape nearing the color black, dreaming of the upcoming party, and the senior wondering how things ended up happening this way and deciding to review and reflect on the events that lead to it.

“It is an honor to be here today, Your Highness.”

Duke preparing for the obligatory greeting for such an occasion, but since he lacked practice in saying such words, his words were monotonous and lifeless. After the customary acknowledgements, he took Leti's fair and slender hand and respectfully brought it to his lips.

“It is my pleasure to have you here. Please enjoy yourselves.” Leti welcomed him with her perfected smile, just as an ideal princess would, and looked at the lad behind Duke.

“My name is Astrid Gale, knight of the Tenth Rank of the Royal Chivalric Order. I humbly give you my thanks for letting me join this occasion.”

“I have heard things about you from my younger brother, such as your exceptional skills as a swordsman despite your young age. Do share some of your stories with me later,” Leti said and flashed a smile at Astrid.

Duke, watching the exchange, thought that he would keep in the deepest parts of his mind the image of Astrid's idiotic, blushing face, as if he had seen a goddess brought to life from a painting. He had long given up on warning Astrid against Leti's beauty, knowing that his efforts would only fall on deaf ears.

“This way.”

As Leti showed them to the garden, they saw Friedhelm playing with the children, carrying a child on each of his arm. When he saw who the newcomers were, he slowly lowered the children and waved his hand to greet Duke.

“Is that Astrid Gale behind you? This is a good chance to invite him to Seventh Heaven².”

Friedhelm greeted Duke briefly and went on to pat Astrid on the shoulder. While Friedhelm was extending his passionate invitations to Astrid, Leti coldly called out Duke's attention.

“I remember asking you to bring your *fiancée* or *lover*, but... anyway, I am a generous and understanding master and I will not be saying anything about your preferences as long as you do your job well.”

Duke understood the meaning behind Leti's words and decided to clear up any misconceptions she was forming inside her head.

“One, I do not have a fiancée or a lover. And two, I brought Astrid here as my companion to have someone to talk to ‘cause I'm quite sure there'd be no place for me in a tea party for the Royal Family.”

“Oh, I see.”

The relief on Leti's face only added to his vexation.

² Seventh Heaven: Friedhelm's own chivalric order

“You need not to worry since I have everything arranged. You shall be at the adult’s table. Think of this as a way to train your junior.”

Duke’s table, as Leti promised, was composed of the older guests in the party. The youngest was sixteen and the oldest was three-and-twenty. However, with a table composed of Friedhelm, Leonhardt, Duke, and Astrid, finding a common topic for conversation was impossible.

“Duke-senpai! The tea is amazing! This is the first time I’ve drank a tea this fragrant and smooth.”

“...Good for you.”

... ..

“Let’s just say this is better than having Guido-ani’ue³ here as well.”

Leonhardt’s words were indeed true, for if Guido were to join them, the atmosphere would no longer pass as awkward – it would automatically be a unanimous decision to just go home.

“Well, I’ll just go and have a heart-to-heart talk with my younger brothers.”

³ Ani’ue: A Japanese honorific used to address one’s older brother. More old-fashioned than the common Onii-san

Leonhardt escaped the awkward atmosphere and moved to a different table, carrying his teacup and some snacks. At least now, the group could have small talk. Duke threw Friedhelm a topic.

“...Your highness, are you in good terms with Princess Leticia?”

“Of course not. She just invited me here as an apology to what she did a while back.”

“Apology?”

“For serving me a goblet of water when I visited her.”

“Aaaah...”

Duke commented as if it were something astonishing with a wry smile, and looked at the same Leti who poured the goblet of water talking with the younger guests at a different table.

“All of them are your siblings?”

“No. There are some cousins. But truthfully, not seeing us as siblings despite being one just shows how much of a bad older brother I am. I've got to admit, she has the advantage on this one.”

Duke could not hide his surprise at Friedhelm's words. He sounded like he was giving Leti credit and recognizing her for it. Friedhelm gave Duke a wry smile, admitting it was the truth.

“It’s not like I only think of myself, you know? The country is my top priority... I don’t want to divide the kingdom and start a war.”

Friedhelm still could not completely rid himself of the pride he held as the first-born prince. He grew up being told that he would be the one succeeding the throne – of course he could not accept it if Guido took the crown, but he was ready to convince himself for Leti. But he had a condition: Leti would be a good ruler, or else he would bring her down. That was Friedhelm’s condition, his point of compromise.

“I think Your Highness will also be a good ruler.”

“‘Also,’ huh? Wonder who the other one is... Anyway, I gratefully accept your compliment.”

Hearing the conversation over at the men’s table, Leti turned around and pointed in their direction. Holding the hand of a small, young lady, Leti approached their table.

“Astrid, could you act as her practice partner for introductions?”

“Me-me-me...me?”

Astrid was surprised at the sudden request.

“The best partner is someone she does not know. The nervousness that comes with it is nearly the same as the real one. Well then...”

“Uhhh... It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Misty Fal Edelle.”

Misty gathered her skirts to the side, raised it a bit, and bent her knees in a curtsy.

“I am Astrid Gale, Knight of the Tenth Rank of the Royal Chivalric Order. It is an honor to meet you.”

Astrid took Misty's hand to kiss it, but it was awkward due to the difference in their height.

“Astrid, you've got to kneel down and meet her eyes,” Friedhelm said.

“Oh, right. Pardon me.”

Following Friedhelm's advice, Astrid knelt down, then chastely placed a kiss on Misty's dainty hand. Misty looked up at Leti with sparkling eyes, waiting for her approval that she had done it well.

“You were excellent.”

Misty's face glowed upon hearing Leti's praise and having her head patted. Even Duke could not help it but smile at such a heartwarming scene.

“Friedhelm-onii-sama⁴, carry me!”

⁴ Onii-sama: Onii =Older Brother | Sama = formal honorific for a high person

In an instant, their table was surrounded by the royal children pulling Friedhelm's arm, begging him to play with them. Friedhelm gave in to their requests and stood up.

"We're gonna take turns, line up! Remember, your cool brother is no longer that young, so don't push me too hard. Astrid, come and help me."

"Yes, sir!"

Friedhelm and Astrid carried and swung the children in the spacious garden. Leti, freed from the role of looking after the young ones, took a seat beside Duke.

"Was it fine to invite Prince Friedhelm alone? Weren't you going to keep the balance?"

"I will invite Prince Guido next time, though I know not if he will come."

"Next time? I thought this tea party was to celebrate your recovery?"

"Well, it is, partly – but this party is really a regular event I host once a month to train my younger siblings how to comport themselves. If they learn and acquire the necessary manners needed early on, they will develop these as habits and will no longer be embarrassed or awkward when they go out into society. You are welcome to join us."

Duke could not reconcile this kind and caring older sister Leti with the high-handed queen he encountered on a regular basis. But this kind older sister was the reason why the neutral faction held the majority of the royal children.

“...No, this one time is enough. I feel so out of place here.”

“You should get used to these kind of events. You cannot keep on saying that when you become my knight.”

“How many times do I have to I tell you? I have no intention of becoming your knight.”

Duke always corrected Leti whenever she snuck that suggestion in. With those statements from her becoming more and more frequent, he remembered someone who sounded just like her. Yes, Leti was very much like her older brother Friedhelm, who was currently playing with his younger siblings.

“The two of you really are brother and sister. Especially that independent attitude you both have, and your tendency not to listen to what others are saying.”

“I get that quite a lot. That I look a lot like Prince Guido outside, but inside I am similar with Prince Friedhelm. But I am really connected to them only by half... I think I should wrap this up. This is no longer study but play time.”

Leti gathered everyone and said that it was time to go home. She led each child back to either their nurses or governesses, leaving only the adult group behind.

The tea party started and ended peacefully without any problems. For Leti, this tea party was not just a mere gathering. It was a carefully calculated plan that was executed to meet certain objectives: one – to teach her younger siblings, two – to deepen her friendship with Duke, and three – a chance to repair her relationship with her older brother. Now that the tea party was over, she concluded this plan as a success and started to give her closing greetings.

“Thank you very much for coming today. I hope...”

The leaves on the tree rustled behind Leti, and then everything else happened in a flash.

Friedhelm pulled Leti closer to him, Duke stood in front to protect them, and Astrid took out his sword.

Leti was surprised with the sudden turn of events, but she remained calm, surprised but not scared, and she peered at Astrid through the space between Friedhelm’s arms.

“Senpai! Cover for me please.”

Astrid walked along the sides of the table and grabbed an empty cup. He threw the cup to the tree, aiming for the part where the branches were still shaking. But the cup hit a branch and broke

into pieces. Then, to everyone's surprise, they heard a high-pitched cry and a black lump of mass fell on Astrid.

“Uwahuwawawah!”

Astrid caught the soft, black fur ball. It had large circular eyes and a long tail. The only word to describe the fallen creature was...

“This... looks... like... a cat.”

“Let's still check. Astrid, climb up.”

“Ah, roger! Please hold the cat.”

Astrid deftly climbed up the tree and confirmed that there was nothing else on top. He jumped straight down to the ground and landed perfectly on his feet.

“Glad it's just a cat, right? I was utterly surprised. Both with the cat and how good your cooperation was! Why don't the three of you just be Ane'ue's⁵ knights? *Ahababa!*”

Leonhardt's words, poking fun at them, brought the three men back to their senses. Friedhelm quickly let go of Leti and distanced himself from the sister he was protecting in his arms, and Duke awkwardly moved his hand up and down the handle of the sword he was holding in battle stance.

⁵ Ane'ue: A Japanese honorific used to address one's older sister. More old-fashioned than the common Onee-san

“This is just my knight’s instinct at work, you see...”

“Oh, I see...” Leti said.

“And I just move on instinct. You see, Guido has been targeting me for a while and...”

“Oh, yes, I see...” Leti agreed with Friedhelm.

“I’m glad you’re safe, Your Highness. Ah! Sorry for breaking the cup!”

“That’s fine. Thank you for saving me.”

Duke and Friedhelm sighed, both thinking that they were idiots. If they just acted the way Astrid did and honestly told Leti that they were glad she was safe, then that would’ve been the end of it. But no, they had to let their egos get in the way and make ridiculous excuses.

“Aaah, I get it. Gimme the cat. I’ll go find someplace I can leave it. The tea and snacks were delicious. See ya!” Friedhelm said as he took the cat by its nape and walked away. Then they heard Friedhelm shout, likely because the cat scratched his face. It looked like both of them were not being honest with themselves.

Putting aside the older brother whose relationship with Leti still needed to be patched up, Leti looked at the men left. Leti saw Leonhardt busy helping Astrid take off the cat fur stuck on Astrid’s knight uniform, and then she faced Duke.

“Duke, thank you.”

Duke did not know how to respond to Leti's unexpected word of thanks. He could not retort with “be grateful” since he already said a while back that it was all his knight's instinct at work.

“That... That was nothing.”

“Better accept my gratitude while you still can, because I do not have any intention of thanking you once you become my knight.”

“Why do you keep on saying that?”

Duke pressed his temples with his fingers, screaming inside, wondering why in the world Leti could not understand him.

“Hey, didn't you see Astrid a while ago? He's a good knight, isn't he? He is a commoner and maybe a bit too young, but his skills are top-notch within the Order. And based on what I see, he's pretty willing to be your knight. So why don't you just give up on me and take Astrid instead?”

“Astrid Gale... Indeed, he is a good knight, but...”

Astrid was a good knight, and even Leonhardt recommended him. So Leti had asked for him to be investigated, and she came up with a conclusion based on that information.

“I do not have the confidence to control him. He is no ordinary knight and it might become troublesome.”

“...Oi.”

“I was incessantly told by my great-great-great-great uncle to train my eyes in discerning people, so I am quite confident with it – that is why I chose you.”

Leti did not say anything else; her silence declared that this conversation was over. Duke, on the other hand was secretly astonished at how perceptive Leti was. He had also thought that Astrid Gale was no ordinary commoner. Astrid had not said a word about it, but having seen him – a novice knight – kill without flinching, Duke had thought Astrid might have worked as a mercenary before. And Leti had noticed that immediately. Indeed, Duke could no longer see Leti as a sheltered princess.

Leti nonchalantly walked towards the tree Astrid climbed, looking up its height. She stepped forward to the tree and her heels made soft knock. There was one thing that the other men did not notice, but Leti did, because of the fact she was the only one who underwent the rigorous training of being a perfect lady.

‘If he can kill the sound of his footsteps at such a height...I can only conclude not so good things about him.’

One of the things required of an accomplished lady was to be able to gracefully dance the waltz. Evening balls would have dancing, and dancing included waltzing, so not being able to do it was unacceptable for any lady of good breeding. Moreover, to claim the title of an excellent dancer, one had to glide and move

like a fairy – gracefully and silently. A dancer with noisy feet was found to be vulgar and barbaric.

“...I guess he is someone to be wary of.”

The tea party Leti hosted as training for her younger siblings, as a way to deepen her relationship with Duke, and as an opportunity to repair her relationship with her brother ended up leaving uneasiness and worry upon its conclusion.

One clear and fine day, a cheery Leonhardt came to visit Leti's room, saying that her tutor had arrived. He handed her a light overcoat. Leti had a bad feeling about where this was going, so she asked Leonhardt what this was all about before putting it on.

“Well, we’re currently airing the scrolls of the artifact inventory and you, Ane'ue, are most welcome to join us.”

“Is that related, in any way, to my lessons?”

“Ehhh... uhmm... ah! I’ll explain which are owned by our family and so on... plus, plus we also have in there one of our national treasures! The original manuscript of the book on the Knight King’s legends! You know, the one about him fighting Evil?”

“You are the only one who would get excited about that. Anyway, I understand. I shall lend you a hand.”

Leti reluctantly wore the coat and gloves and helped in taking out the ancient scrolls. Doing such work made Leti asked why copies of it weren’t made, but they answered that it would be a problem if the original ones had molds. Leti, seeing the logic in it, agreed as she dusted off a sheet and laid it neatly on the wooden stand.

“Don’t you find it interesting that the Knight King’s sword and the phantom twelve Promise Swords are included in the list?”

“Well, is it?”

“Think about this: putting aside the question if they are real or not, we have the age-old, rusted and worn out Knight Sword owned by the Knight King Christian himself, but the twelve Promise Swords said to have been granted to his knights are nowhere to be found. So here’s the interesting part, at least for a historian. Why did Administrative King Karlheinz include the Promise Swords in his inventory? Was it just for the sake of an idea, an impossible dream? Or was it because those swords indeed existed during that time and are only lost now? Interesting, right? *Abababa!*”

Leonhardt showed Leti the sheet containing the swords. Indeed, the Knight King’s sword and the Promise Swords given to his twelve knights were written in the inventory.

“Your beloved King Karlheinz was the one who compiled this inventory, you know? I’m sure this took a lot of his time to do this, but we are really grateful for his efforts.”

“Well, he seems to be the type of person who would like these kind of meticulous tasks.”

Leti was quite certain that the ones who did the actual job were his servants following his orders, but someone who would even come up with an idea like this qualified King Karlheinz as meticulous. She wanted to know the reason why he kept such a list, but she had yet to meet him in his later years, so she hadn’t had the chance to ask him directly in *that* place.

“I haven’t heard that in a while,” Leonhardt said as he opened the book he was holding and brushed off a dead insect’s body.

“Heard what?”

“You speak as if you’re friends with some historical personalities. Don’t you remember you taught me history that way?”

“...Really...”

Leonhardt’s body was weak when he was small, so their mother stayed with him while Leti was left alone most of the time. To overcome that loneliness, she frequented the Knight King’s Space and talked with the his other reincarnations, and when she woke up, she shared the stories they talked about with Leonhardt.

“Your stories were like vivid dramas written by a wonderful historical playwright so I remember them well. I became a historian because I was attracted to those behind-the-scene stories you told me. In other words, it was you who made me become like this. *Ahababa!*”

“Do not put the blame on me.”

Leti took another volume of the inventory, scanning its pages, and her eyes stopped on a particular article.

“Is this book worthy to be included in this list?”

“The original copy, yes. The one available in the Archive is just a replica.”

The article that caught Leti’s attention was a book – a collection of stories on what happened to Lion King Alexander after his dethronement.

According to history, King Alexander’s most trusted friend and Prime Minister lead a revolution against him – killing him in the process. However, one of his loyal knights brought his corpse outside the kingdom and continued to lament for him, so the body of the Lion King was not in the Royal Tomb. Since there was no body and particular location of death, some theories came out saying that he was not dead. Then, during the time of Administrative King Karlheinz, a book compiling those stories was written, and the original copy made its way into the Royal Inventory.

“Is the original one an academic book? I have only read the idiotic book containing unbelievable after-death theories on King Alexander.”

“Exactly as you say, they were all unbelievable stories. Though I find the one saying King Alexander did not die, but continued to live and become a pirate in the Southern Seas and conquered a country, making him their king, the most interesting.”

Hearing Leonhardt say the theories were fictitious stunned Leti. Upon finishing arranging a batch of the inventory, Leti took off the coat and gloves and told him she was done helping them.

Leti started to walk faster towards the Royal Villa. She wanted clean herself since she was still feeling dust all over her despite wearing an overcoat, and she kept brushing it off her dress. She chose to take the route less traveled and passed by people to prevent seeing her in such a disheveled state. However, despite her efforts, a palace guard came out of a corner and bowed his head to her. She continued to walk on, imagining how nice a bath would be, when she stopped sensing anyone around her. She silenced her footsteps and quietly moved toward the presence she felt.

“Isn't it 'bout time? The race to the throne is finished. Make up your mind and join Seventh Heaven already. Your seat has yet to be taken.”

Leti heard the voice of her older brother, and he was probably talking with his best friend. She came to the conclusion that the

only thing they would talk about in a deserted place such as this would be their true feelings.

“You’re wasting your time, your talent, and your skills at being an unaffiliated knight.”

“If, as you say, the race for the crown is over, then all the more I should stay under Prince Guido’s faction out of duty. My family may be at the tail end, but we’re still part of the nobility, and that is a complicated world.”

Duke wanted to end the conversation there, but Friedhelm still had something to say.

“I’m surprised you’re still bringing up Guido’s name in this conversation. I was sure it would be Leticia’s.”

“That is more unbelievable.”

Duke, feeling as if his defenses were being stripped down, turned his back on Friedhelm, and walked away thinking of how pointless the conversation was. But Friedhelm was not yet done with him.

“Do you know what it means to be Leticia’s knight?”

Friedhelm wrapped his left hand around Duke’s neck.

“If you were ordered to, you’ve got to kill me like this. Can you really do it?”

Friedhelm's action tested Duke's friendship with him – and he was testing whether or not Duke was worthy to be Leti's knight. Leti, on the other hand, let out a silent sigh as she watched the two men's competition of stubbornness from afar.

Duke never considered anyone else but you. You are a fool to doubt that.'

Leti wanted to wait for them to go their separate ways, but since their glaring contest seemed like it would last forever, she decided to end it herself.

“Would you please stop harassing my knight?”

“...Leticia.”

“I am not one to intentionally wound other people. If I wanted you dead, I would not ask Duke to do it for me; I would do it myself. Just like this.”

Friedhelm felt the chill of cold metal pressed against the small of his back. He could acutely feel the shuddering cool of the metal but his clothes and skin were still intact. Leti was pressing some kind of blade against him with no hesitation, leaving only his clothes as his shield. One wrong move and he was sure that Leti's weapon would cut into him.

“At least make your hands shake a little. You really ain't adorable at all.”

“Shall I make my hands tremble next time?”

Friedhelm raised his hands in surrender, and Leti finally stepped away from him. He turned around to see what her weapon was but she had already hidden it.

“...Well, I guess it is better for you to have a knife to protect yourself. We are supposedly targeting your life, after all.”

“Yes, that is about it. So would you mind going ahead and leaving me to court my knight in private?”

“Yes, yes. See ya ‘round Duke!”

Friedhelm waved his hand in goodbye. To lighten up the mood, Leti jokingly said to Duke that their friendship was quite disturbing. She was also starting to hate that part of herself that was always trying to calm everything down. Being neutral for eight years found a way to ingrain such an attitude in her.

“Where are your guards?”

“I left them inside the treasure room with Leonhardt, who is in heaven right now. Besides, I do not think anyone would be stupid enough to attack me in broad daylight.”

“But still... oh, forget it. I understand perfectly that you’ll listen and literally listen only to what I have to say. Moving on, where exactly did you hide that knife? A girl with a hidden knife is just as disturbing, in my humble opinion.”

Duke was thankful for Leti's kindness in lightening up the mood and changed the topic. He examined Leti's appearance from

head to toe and did not find anything amiss from her usual perfect stance. But just when he was convinced, Leti reached out for the ribbon on her back.

“Hiding a knife in a dress is impossible. That was a spoon.”

“...Huh?”

“It need not be a real blade; anything that can produce the same cold metallic feel when pressed on one’s back can be mistaken as one. Besides, I cannot kill anyone with a spoon no matter how hard I press it against someone.”

Let took out from her ribbon a silver spoon and showed it to Duke. He was dumbfounded by the fact that she really had one, but Leti just shrugged her shoulders at him and returned it to her ribbon.

“You can’t protect yourself with a mere spoon, you know?”

“I know... besides, I do not need a knight; I can protect myself. The only reason why I need one is to fill up all of the posts for the Knights of the Round. So I am here now, bowing my head and begging you to take the first seat.”

“I’ve told you my answer already. And I haven’t seen you bow your head to me,” Duke instantly retorted, but restrained himself from saying anything else that could lead the conversation astray.

“I’m perfectly aware how brave and intelligent you are, but you should also know that sometimes those qualities alone are not enough to deal with the situation.”

“Are you worried about me?”

“...Yes. If anything happens to the kingdom’s future queen, it’ll be a huge catastrophe.”

Duke’s reply was still unsure and not honest with himself, but Leti said that such a reply would do for now. She walked away and left Duke alone.

“Them being close friends makes things complicated.”

Leti was not demanding Duke to be her knight in the truest sense of the word – a knight that would swear his life and loyalty to his master. But she knew well that Duke couldn’t be anything else but a true knight.

“Lion King Alexander and Revolution King Julius were best friends, too. King Julius betrayed King Alexander, but King Alexander never found it in his heart to hate his friend. That proves how strong their bond was, and I am sure that what Duke and Onii-sama has is the same.”

Leti’s feet stopped, wondering whether or not she really had what it took to break into that bond.

‘If only I had the qualities Friedhelm Onii-sama has, qualities suited to be the king, then...’

Leti shook her head, driving away the negative thoughts, and told herself that there wasn't anything good in wishing for something she did not have. She only had to give her best efforts to be her ideal self.

“I will not give up on you, Duke. Not until you are the one that will come to me, crawling and begging to be my knight. I will not stop.”

Duke might have shouted, “Give me a break!” if he heard Leti's encouragement for herself.

Duke, completely ignorant of Leti's newfound determination, went back to camp to take his meal. The food from the camp's cafeteria was quite decent in taste and generous with the servings. Upon taking his seat, he fiddled with the unused spoon and fork with his fingers.

“Senpai?”

Duke pressed the spoon on Astrid's back, befuddling his junior by his actions.

“Astrid, what is this I'm pressing on your back?”

“Eh...? A spoon? A fork? ...A spoon.”

“How did you know?”

“It would be pricklier if it were a fork.”

Duke removed the spoon from Astrid, then took the fork in his hands. He agreed with Astrid’s answer and asked another question.

“Then you wouldn’t mistake a spoon for a knife?”

“That’s a bit hard to identify. I mean both have round tips...”

“Round? I don’t mean a dining knife, I mean a weapon, like a short blade.”

Astrid thought of what Duke said.

“I don’t think I’d make a mistake on that. But maybe the presence, the impression can change it.”

“Right...”

Now it was Duke’s turn to think. Leti said it was a spoon, but was it really a spoon? She also said the same thing before, that it was a spoon that broke his cup⁶, but he was not really convinced.

“This is the second time I felt that there’s something different about her. I can no longer convince myself that everything was my imagination.”

Duke felt that Leti was hiding something, and that something was definitely not a spoon.

⁶ See Chapter I.



“An art inventory? That sounds like a very tiresome thing to do.”

Leti asked the young Administrative Karlheinz she met in the Knight King’s Space today about the inventory list, but the young King still hadn’t thought about it.

“But I can think of several reasons why I would do such a thing. One of them is to aid in destroying Ghost Energies that sometimes pose as art pieces. I may have come up with that idea to help the next reincarnation of the Knight King, as sometimes the interval between one is long.”

“Ghost Energy?” Leti and Heart-broken King Ludgar asked in unison.

King Ludgar was a reincarnation of the Knight King after Leti's time. He would be leaving great accomplishments in his name, and he had a proper posthumous title worthy of those. But the countless number of times his heart was broken left a mark in history, earning him his other title of the Heart-broken King, to which he was more known for – or so Leti had heard from later kings after him.

“Ghost Energies are artifacts from the Knight King Christian’s time. These are imitations of the twelve Promise Swords King

Christian granted to his knights – in other words, weapons created by his enemies to defeat him. But these Ghost Energies have a flaw, so they were later known as cursed items.”

“What is their flaw? Do they suck life?”

“Yes. Ghost Energy can give its user the strongest power they desire by converting the user’s life force. Thus, these items are branded as cursed by those who knew nothing. Most people die in half a year after harnessing its power.”

Karlheintz story provided the source of the cursed articles coming out in stories. Leti nodded as she knew another of history’s secrets.

“Ghost Energies no longer exist in our time, don’t they? Creepy,” Heart-broken King Ludgar said, shrugging his shoulders.

“I believe most of them were already destroyed in King Alexander’s and my time, but there might have been one or two left in your time, Queen Leticia.”

“How shall I deal with it?”

“Well, you...”



“...Intruder!”

Leti jolted up, took the short blade hidden under her pillow, and looked around. She only had to stall the intruder until her

guards came, and besides, she could protect herself even if they came in late.

“Someone, come here quickly!” Leti cried out in the dark to her guards, who were supposed to be right outside her room.

Suddenly, she felt a strong, murderous intent. She lifted the darkness with something unseen, and then a shrill sound came, followed by knives – but neither touched Leti, for she was surrounded by something shielding her from the knives, leaving them on the floor.

“Don’t tell me you’re...” The assassin murmured in the darkness. Leti felt as if she had seen the sharp, piercing green eyes of the assassin. His voice sounded familiar as well. She frantically searched her memory to piece the information together.

“I am what?”

“You’re the kni...”

“Your Highness! Are you safe!?”

The assassin chose to retreat when he heard the voices of the guards. He quietly climbed down the window where he seemed to have entered from.

“Your Highness!”

The guards came rushing into the dark room, but Leti answered calmly that she was fine.

“The intruder ran away through the window. Station a guard by it and then contact the Order. Tell them to go after him, though I doubt they can catch him.”

Leti gave her orders one after the other and drove her guards out of her room. She cut several wounds on herself using the assassin’s knives, and she scattered those on top of the sheets to make it look like she used them as her shield. She wouldn’t want people to wonder how she was able to evade all of the knives in the dark.

“*Argb!* And we were in the middle of talking about Ghost Energy.”

Leti still didn’t know what kinds of things were considered as Ghost Energy or how to destroy one. But since she hadn’t heard any news pertaining to cursed items, she could simply ask King Karlheinz again about this topic on a later date.

“Your Highness, we have come to clean your room. Shall we prepare a different room for you to rest?”

“No, thank you. It is a bit early, but I shall continue on with my day. Could you prepare tea for me?”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

If she were being honest, Leti wanted to lie down and sleep again, but decided against it. After all, today was an important day for her.

“But to think I am going to start this day like this...”

Leti's day started with almost getting killed. She didn't feel good about it, but decided to put it on the side so as not to ruin the rest of her day. Today was the day she was given permission to attend, or rather to observe, from the inside the Kingdom's politics. She was allowed to join the morning sessions to show her how the Kingdom was run. Her two older brothers had attended several sessions already, but she was never given the chance to join, since they thought that she would be given to some other country or a powerful member of the peerage as a bride, and there would be no use even if she did join the meetings.

A king's day was normally composed of meetings in the morning, and official visits and holding audience with his subjects in the afternoon. As of this day, Leti would be taking part in some of these responsibilities. Her mornings would be spent in the main castle more, and her afternoons would be slowly filled with visits around the kingdom as the King's representative. It was also highly possible that she would play a bigger role in foreign affairs by going on diplomatic visits in the name of the Kingdom.

“But diplomacy and foreign affairs management is best suited for Prince Friedhelm.”

One, he was handsome. He was such a beautiful lad, and his amicability and friendliness radiate from his face. Two, he was open-minded and had the charisma to attract people around him. Leti thought it'd be better to leave foreign affairs with him. He

probably did not realize it since it was so natural for him, but he had this part of him that could make people feel safe and believe that everything would be fine if they left it to him. This was something innate in him, and no amount of effort could make one attain it.

“Prince Guido is ideal for internal administration; he is just the perfect Prime Minister type.”

Compared with First Prince Friedhelm, who was suited for foreign affairs, Second Prince Guido would be better working on the internal affairs of the Kingdom with his detailed planning and the needed drive to execute the plan flawlessly. He’d fare better with managing the taxes, or planning and giving the instructions for ceremonies, rather than weathering through the unpredictable tides of foreign affairs. These tasks required flexibility and versatility in dealing the situation. He could simply gain the trust of the people as he worked along the way, completing one task after the other.

Leti could easily think of reasons why her two older brothers could be the better kings, but she did not envy them, rather...

“...If the three of us can just cooperate and rule the kingdom together, Sommevesle will be stable...”

If the three of them would help each other in ruling the kingdom, maybe they’d even get the “Sibling Kings” posthumous title. Leti gathered the hem of her gown and started walking as she thought of the impossible future she was secretly hoping for.

“That is for all today. Session adjourned.”

Leti wondered how many names she had taken down in her mental diary during the session. Around half of the cabinet ministers were in foul moods, and dozed off during the meeting. The man beside her kept saying things off the point, and then the other members would follow in their own irritating opinions. If the sessions were always like this, then Leti was sure she'd really be known as the Rant Queen. She hid behind her papers her twitching, forced smile and straightened the appearing creases in between her eyebrows.

‘Seniority is... plain troublesome. The worst part is that I cannot do anything about the stupid ones that only have high statuses... Well, I really cannot do much about low-ranking stupid members, either.’

Despite all that, Leti was aware of her own shortcomings. Her plate was already full just by quietly attending the meeting, trying to read in between the lines and planning what to do for the future.

“Princess Leticia!”

“How may I help you, Earl Brightkreutz?”

“If it pleases you, would you like to join me for luncheon after this? We may talk about the proceedings this morning...”

Leti answered that she'd be glad to join him and placed her hand on the young earl's offered left arm, despite knowing the fact that her complaints in her diary would increase. She just convinced herself that making the connection now with Earl Brightkreutz, a young man few years older than her, might prove to be useful in the future.

“I see I cannot be a Lion King or an Administrative King...”

“Pardon me?”

Leti's soft whisper did not reach the earl's ear and she replied with a smile that it was nothing.

I cannot be like Lion King Alexander, who can gallantly round up matters, nor be a genius like Administrative King Karlheinz, who was able to continue to execute internal reforms and external revolutions even after losing his wife, who was his partner in life.'

Leti mockingly thought of herself as a half-baked queen in comparison to the past and future reincarnations of the Knight King. She could only be a queen whose sole talents were to skillfully manipulate people of talent to work for her and return whatever trust is given to her.

Duke wanted to say it was all a coincidence. It really was. He was just out in town for patrol duties when he saw a golden-haired lady. Even he didn't want to believe that the said blonde lass he saw was Her Highness, Princess Leticia, roaming around town and, of course, without her guards. Duke knew at once that she was out for her incognito walk. He wanted to scold her right at once, but they were not in the right place and nor was he in the position to, so he had second thoughts on calling out to her.

“Is she headed to the North Cemetery? Visiting someone there?”

The North Cemetery was where the Royal family was laid to rest, and no outsiders were allowed to go there. At the deepest part of the cemetery was the basement where the Kings of the past lay. One day, Leti, too, would be placed there for her eternal rest. It wouldn't be peculiar to find her there; no one would scold her if they saw her there. Besides, it was a no trespassing area, but there weren't real guards stationed, so it had become a playground for children who did not know what *treason* meant yet.

Duke couldn't decide whether he should call her or not, but by the time he had made up his mind, his shadow was already long and the sun was beginning to set. He had lingered on his decision for far too long.

“Lady Cia! I wouldn't mind if you wanted to stay here as long as you want to if you have your guards with you. But if you are

alone, I think it'd be better for you to go home now while there is still light.”

Leti, having spaced out, was surprised when she saw Duke by her side, their long shadows standing close to each other. She, unusually, agreed silently and started walking after giving a slight bow to pay her respects to the grave.

“I did not plan to stay long, but look at the time.”

Leti seemed tired, for her steps lacked their usual spirit. Duke normally did not have to adjust his pace for Leti, but today, he had to walk a bit slowly.

‘Her Highness just turned seventeen last month right... She’s too young.’

Those her age normally felt lost or confused and had a lot of things going on inside their heads. Of course it was natural to feel those things, especially for someone like her, who was carrying such big responsibilities.

“Are you worried about something?” Duke made sure that his question sounded nonchalant.

Leti replied with a sigh, “I was just disappointed with myself, that’s all. So disappointed that I was nearly able to convince myself why I am called the Leftover Princess.”

“Those who stand on top have great responsibilities to bear. That is also the reason why they have to complain sometimes, to have someone that’ll listen to them... I’m willing to be the wind

now, you know?" Duke's kind and understanding voice said those words as if he were an older brother persuading his younger sister to tell him her fears. Leti faltered for a moment because of that, but it only lasted for a moment, for strength came back quickly in her eyes. Her eyes sparked, showing Duke that there was no need for his help.

"That stubbornness you've got there inside you does not suite a beautiful young lady... but that is exactly what a ruler needs. I am sure you will be a great queen."

Duke's casual words touched Leti's heart.

"You keep on refusing my invitation to be knight and yet you know and tell me the words I desire to hear the most...I hate this situation. It just makes me want to have you as my knight even more!"

Releasing her sentiments made Leti feel a little bit better, and her steps naturally got lighter. Duke was relieved to see the usual spirit back in Leti's steps. And just as she was coming back to her normal self, Duke walked quickly and stood in front of her. Three members of the Order, Duke's colleagues, waved at him.

"Why should it be him!?"

If they had just been normal Order knights, then he could easily tell them that he was an escort to Princess Leticia. But unfortunately, some of them were under Guido's faction. If they found out about Leti going out of the castle *alone*... He could only think of ominous things awaiting her.

“Duke! Hitting on girls while on duty, are we?”

“Of course not!”

Duke covered Leti with his back and wished for his colleagues to go away. Leti, on the other hand, was preparing for the worst. If the need arose, she would voluntarily reveal her identity and admit that she was out on a date with Duke to cover up her incognito walks.

“...Hey, just play along and don’t move,” Duke whispered in Leti’s ears.

Leti turned around to face Duke when he slowly wrapped his left arm to her waist and placed his right hand on her neck. Before Leti could ask him what he was doing, Duke leaned in closer and covered her face with his. Duke’s fellow knights yelled at him with jest – exactly how Duke expected them to react.

“Sorry guys, but as you can see, I’m in the middle of a date. So don’t interrupt us.”

Duke, with all his might, buried Leti’s face into his chest, shielding her face from their sight. With this, the only information they’d have on the lady was her golden locks. None would be the wiser that the lady was Princess Leticia.

“Wow! Being showy, aren’t we?”

“We get it, Duke. Take all the time you need.”

People liked to snoop their noses if something were being kept a secret, but flaunt it and they'd be the ones to back out. Duke finally relaxed when his colleagues were in a distance far enough for them not to notice Leti's face.

"Oi, we're coming home. *Now*. Things like that might happen again, so you'd better stop going out of the castle alone." Duke warned Leti, who he was still holding in his arms.

Leti looked up at him, and with all her might, punched him in the stomach. He unconsciously leaned forward, gasping for breath as he struggled to identify what, exactly, hit him.

"What...the...heck...are you doing?"

"This is not about what I am doing. This is about what you did!"

His thoughts hadn't even cleared yet when he felt a stinging pain on his cheeks. The punch was followed by a slap delivered by Leti's delicate hand. The only thing Duke could do was to clench his teeth. He, teary-eyed from the pain, looked up at Leti – her face was flushed and her body was shaking in anger.

"...It was just an act! Pretend!" Duke answered in his defense when he understood what all of this was for.

"You were too close!"

"Getting that close was not a big deal. You are seventeen. I won't believe you if you say you haven't had any experience with

this sort of thing. Prince Friedhelm was playing to his heart's content at your age."

"Don't underestimate a sheltered maiden's inexperience! And don't you ever group me again with my stupid brother!"

Duke was surprised upon hearing Leti's roundabout way of saying she did not have any experience in kissing.

"Huh?"

Leti raised her hand to give Duke another slap because of his exclamation but he was able to catch her hand before a slap landed on his other cheek.

"I... I understand now. So let's just have a truce. The punch was for the kiss act, and the slap for my thoughtless remarks. Deal?"

"I actually punched you to slap you, so technically it is considered as one move... But, oh well... Deal."

Leti's move was a one-two combination. She had punched Duke to deal with the height difference so when he leaned forward, Leti could slap him. Duke silently cursed the person who taught her such a high-skilled self-defense move. He would probably never know that it was his best friend, Friedhelm, who taught her that.

“A princess cannot easily marry anyone, right? Even the one they love? So you'd better try and play a bit before you marry. I know you can get whoever you want.”

“Oh yes. You just played me a while ago.”

“Quit saying it that way! That was different and you already know that!”

They went back to castle while exchanging sneaky remarks at each other. When they reached their usual parting place, Leti turned around to face Duke and remembered that she had something to ask him.

“An assassin came to attack me this morning and he said some parting words to me. What do you think follows, ‘Don’t tell me you’re the...’ The first syllable is *na*. He didn’t get to finish it.”

“What? An assassin!? Then what in the world are you doing out here alone!? This is dangerous! I’ll escort you until the Royal Villa!”

“You are exaggerating. This is not first time such a thing has happened. There is no need to make a fuss out of it. So what do you think?”

But Duke could not possibly think and come up with an answer for Leti's question. He was much more concerned about the assassin's attack than what Leti was asking. Leti regretted telling Duke about the attack when she saw his troubled

expression. She could have just directly asked him her question without any prelude. Duke may look scary with his big frame and usually dour expression, but he was a really kind person to the core, and Leti's words made him worry a lot.

“...Hmmm... Don't tell me... you're the... knight-less princess?” he suggested.

“Ah, I see.”

So the confused Duke came up with an answer, but it did not help Leti at all. She coldly said thanks to Duke for his meaningless answer and climbed up the wall.

“Oi, you'd better get a skilled knight to stay by your side, even just a temporary one. You can get Astrid!”

“I heard your warning, heard it. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Let jumped down to the other side of the wall, and she was no longer visible to Duke. He made a stern face at how Leti was so used to climbing up and going down.

“What the heck are her guards doing? If I were your knight, I certainly wouldn't let you go anywhere alone...”

Duke shook his head the moment words left his lips, trying to deny the fact that he thought of something he'd do if he were Leti's knight.

“It’s natural to worry... I’m no longer a stranger, of course I will...”

Duke pretended not to notice the budding answer inside him. Rather, he convinced himself that he wouldn’t get involved any further.

The Cattleya Court, a part of the Royal Palace, was where the Queen Consorts lived. Men were restricted in this area, so Leti had to leave her guards by the entrance. She had already finished her business inside, so she was strolling along the garden on her way back to the entrance where her guards were waiting for her. However, rain clouds were starting to gather, so she started to quicken her pace. Today’s weather was not good for a stroll.

“Oh, berries are already ripe and sweet during this season...”

Leti was debating with herself where to start the activity with her younger sisters – whether it would be from making the jam, or if she should prepare the jam in advance and start with making the snacks. Then her feet stopped upon seeing a man inside the Court.

Men are technically not allowed here, but princes are exceptions. Has he come to visit Queen Rosalind’?

⁷ Friedhelm’s mother. Third Queen Consort.

But Prince Friedhelm did not seem to be going towards that direction. It looked more like he was using Cattleya Court as shortcut. Leti hesitated for a moment, but made up her mind to call him.

“Prince Friedhelm, do you hate berries?”

“Berries?”

Recently, the only conversation they have had was about Friedhelm’s recommended husband candidates. Since Leti did not hide her irritation on the topic, she obviously avoided Friedhelm. So he was, indeed, surprised that Leti was the one initiating the conversation.

“I like them.”

“Good. It shall be berries then.”

“Sorry, but I don’t get it.”

“I will be making some sweets with our little sisters, and I figured you might be troubled if you received something you hate, so I wanted to confirm it with you.”

“Oh, I see. But you didn’t have to worry about that. I won’t tell them straight at their faces I hate it even though I really do. I can deal with that situation with a smile plastered on my face.”

“Oh, right. I forgot.” Leti said those words as if she was admiring Friedhelm’s thoughtfulness.

“I wonder if Prince Guido likes them as well.”

“Isn't he banning sweets 'cause it's just a waste?”

“But I have to give one to him if I will be giving you one, lest it become troublesome. I just hope he will accept it with a smile.”

“A sneer, most likely. He's good at doing that.”

The conversation they were having was good; they were able to have a normal one. Now, if she could just talk with him like this more, then they'd have wider topics to cover, and maybe, in time, she could ask for his cooperation politically.

“How about Duke and Astrid? They also told me they wanted to give one to the two knights who attended the last tea party.”

“I think Duke's fine, but I'm not quite sure about Astrid. I can go and ask Duke about Astrid; I'm on my way to meet him.”

“You are going to meet with Duke? Then I shall come with you.”

So Leti and Friedhelm were on their way to meet Duke. Following lazy Friedhelm's lead meant that Leti would go around the Royal Palace without her guards, whom she left at the entrance of Cattleya Court, because Friedhelm's intended route would go out to the other side. She was thinking of an excuse for her guards when she saw the handrails of the corridor marking the Court's boundaries.

“Do you always use this route?”

Leti frowned at Friedhelm as he nimbly climbed over the handrails.

“This is the shortest way. Here, lemme give you a hand.”

“There is no need.”

Leti rejected Friedhelm’s help and climbed down the wall with agility by herself. Of course, the low handrails were nothing compared to the high palace walls she easily climbed up and down for her incognito walks.

“Well, well, well. We shouldn’t be calling you the Leftover Princess! ‘Tomboy Princess’ should be better for you.”

“I think ‘that’s my sister’ would have been better for this case.”

Their exchange of meaningless banter was a normal thing. After they had moved a few steps into the Castle, Leti heard a voice calling her from behind, so she turned around to have a look.

“What is the matter?”

“Well...” answered the maid. Her voice and face clearly showed that it was something difficult for her to speak of until Leti and Friedhelm noticed nearly at the same time what the purpose of the maid was.

“Move out!”

Friedhelm pulled Leti's arm and shielded her from the approaching paper knife the maid wielded. The knife cut not Leti, but the back of Friedhelm's hand.

“Your hand...”

“Just a scratch. Darn it! We just went out of a sword-prohibited zone and this happens!”

Some parts of the royal palace prohibited carrying of any weapons, such as the Throne Room and Assembly Halls. These were called sword-prohibited zones, and only the palace guards were allowed to carry one. This rule was decided during King Alexander's time to prevent violence during meetings and discussions. There had been an incident during his time where the discussion during the meeting became too heated and the members ended up drawing their swords.

Friedhelm thought he could easily finish his business, so he did not bother bringing his sword. To add to that, his knights, the Seventh Heaven, were nowhere near the vicinity since he passed through Cattleya Court. He was frantically thinking of what he could use as a weapon when he remembered the time that Leti threatened him.

“You carry a knife with you, right? Lend that to me.”

“I only have a spoon.”

“Spoon!? ...Was the same thing you used on me?”

“I will not deny it.”

Friedhelm shouted in frustration. He was fooled by Leti, by a spoon. Nonetheless, he was on his guard shielding Leti should the maid lunge again. Leti was also thinking of how they should deal with this.

“I don’t have any choice...You can protect yourself, right? On my signal, run as fast as you can towards the gates. Not towards Cattleya Court.”

But Leti shook her head in disagreement. The maid might just be a diversion, and it was still not clear who the real target was.

“I do not think separating is a good thing. But can you do something about her if I cause a diversion?”

“Haven’t fought a paper knife before but I’ll try.”

This would’ve been easy if Leti was alone. Well, it would still be easy if it were fine for her to be *seen* by her brother, but to deal a certain amount of damage to the maid while not exposing herself to was difficult.

“Then, step back and watch. You probably don’t know it, but my fighting skills were at par with Duke’s during our Academy days.”

And these were not just words. Friedhelm tackled the maid and took the knife away from her.

“Bravo! I would have asked you to be my knight if you were not a prince.”

“It was my pleasure. Make sure to thank me later!” Friedhelm arrogantly hummed as he took the ribbon from Leti's hair and tied the maid's feet.

“Got any other ribbons?”

“I do.”

Leti untied the one wrapped around her waist and gave it to Friedhelm. The spoon hidden in it fell with a clang.

“You really *do* have a spoon...”

“I can only hide that much, though I guess I can learn a thing or two from her and try hiding a knife.”

Friedhelm, after tying up the maid, stood up and looked at the wound on his left hand. The bleeding already stopped, and the cut was not deep.

“The paper knife was a blind spot. It isn't a weapon but a tool, though still enough to hurt. And to think it was in here in the Royal Palace.”

Friedhelm picked up the knife that was lying on the floor. It had an intricate and peculiar design.

“Take a look this. This might be worth a fortune. The design might even date back to King Christian's time!”

“Is it that old?”

“These carving patterns are particular for that era. This might have originally been a weapon, like a dagger of sorts, and was changed to a paper knife. I can imagine that this item is worthy to be a national treasure, but was overlooked by King Karlheinz when he was doing his inventory since it had been used normally within the castle.”

Leti listened to Friedhelm’s hypothesis about the paper knife and agreed with his conclusion, but she felt she was missing the point even though she already had the necessary information, and couldn’t connect the dots.

‘A former dagger from the Knight King’s era... Redesigned as a paperknife and overlooked by Administration King’s inventory...’

Thinking of the events chronologically didn’t help her, so maybe she had to look at this from a different standpoint...

‘Why did King Karlheinz do the inventory...? To destroy ghost energies posing as art works...!’

“Drop that!” Leti shouted. If it had been a weapon during King Christian’s time, then it was possible.

Friedhelm was surprised with Leti’s cry and tried to let go of the paper knife, but his hand would not listen to him.

“Huh? What’s this?”

“This really is...”

Leti reached out to Friedhelm's hand and attempted to loosen it from his grip, but his fingers wouldn't budge. If this was really related to Ghost Energy, then she had to do something about it. King Karlheinz said that those who got possessed with ghost energies only had six months at most to live.

“Go away!” Friedhelm shouted.

But before Leti could even ask why, Friedhelm's left hand moved and held her neck. He was strangling her, and he did not know what to do or why it was happening. He could only plead with his eyes for Leti to run away. But his hand did not loosen its grip on Leti, and it became tighter and tighter the more Friedhelm wished to loosen it. And then, Leti's vision faded out.



“Wait! I am not supposed to come here or else I will die!”

“Hey, noisy today, aren't we? What's wrong?”

The only way to come to the Knight King's Space is to be unconscious in the real world. So if Leti was here, it meant she went unconscious due to Friedhelm strangling her. Therefore, if she didn't go back to the real world and woke up right now, “death” was the only end waiting for her.

Leti was going to return to the real world when she remembered something and asked Lion King Alexander, “What is Ghost Energy?”

The only knowledge Leti had of it was what she heard from Administrative King Karlheinz – that Ghost Energies were like cursed art pieces created during the time of Knight King Christian, and that its bearer would die within half a year.

“Well, I heard that they were weapons created by the enemies of King Christian to copy the Promise Swords, but they all looked like cursed items to me,” answered King Alexander.

“Yes, I know that much. I also heard that the owner would die within half a year.”

“Nah, it’s more complicated than that. A human wounded by the Ghost Energy would lose their control over their own body ‘cause they’d be manipulated by it. We used to call them ‘slaves.’ Ghost Energies were originally created to kill the stupid Knight King Christian, so naturally, the slaves would move according to that logic.”

Alexander grinned with excitement.

“Do you get the connection now? It means that we, reincarnations of the Knight King, are also targets of the Ghost Energies. There’s no point in hiding your identity, they’ll always know. Those blasted Ghost Energies are too persistent for their own good.”

The Lion King here right now might be fighting against one. He then laughed, saying he was indeed attacked by one a while ago.

“How can I return a slave to normal?”

“Kill ‘em.”

Lion King Alexander, a king who used drastic measures to rebuild his kingdom, gave the coldest and yet the simplest answer to Leti's question. But Leti had her own circumstances and could not easily swallow King Alexander's medicine.

“Is there another way?”

“...Hmmm... if he was just possessed, you might be able to do something. Take a close look at his shadow. There should be a thread-like shadow connecting the slave to the host – the body that has become one with the Ghost Energy. Erase that with light and the slave'd be back to normal. The Ghost Energy can create infinite number of slaves, but it can only control one at a time. Use that knowledge well in fighting against it.”

“Thank you! I shall come back now.”

“As long as the host is still alive, it'll just create new slaves. Make sure to kill the host and then purify the weapon with the Flame Sword. Got that?”

Leti heard Alexander's warning from a distance as her consciousness drifted back to reality.



“Who...is...manipulating...me?” Friedhelm said in a strained voice as he fought the force making him strangle Leti.

“Let this hand, my hand, free Leti! I don’t want to do this to my sister!”

If this situation continued, Friedhelm’s unconscious sister would die by his own hands. Friedhelm prayed for help to come, help in whatever form. And his prayers were answered.

“Prince Friedhelm!”

Duke’s surprised voice echoed throughout the place. He did not expect to see such a sight when he simply went out to search for his late friend. He immediately knew *something* was wrong when he saw his friend strangling Leti.

“DUKE! Hurry and take my hand off Leti! Quick!”

Duke moved instantly and went to loosen Friedhelm’s grip on Leti’s neck without paying much attention to the contradiction between Friedhelm’s words and his current actions. Duke, with all his might, pulled Friedhelm’s hand away, and that was enough to loosen the grip, even just for a moment. Air passed through Leti’s throat. But Duke’s strength wasn’t enough to pull Friedhelm’s hand away.

“Princess, please hold on a little long...!”

Duke's speech was cut off by the pain he felt on his hand. Friedhelm's left hand, holding the paper knife, wounded Duke, and the wound felt like it was digging through his flesh despite the shallow cut. Blood gushed down from the cut, and head-splitting pain attacked Duke.

‘What the heck should I do!?’

In the midst of chaos, it was clear in Duke's mind who should be prioritized. He knew he should do whatever means possible to ensure the life of the heir, the life of Leti.

“Duke, I'm giving you the permission to draw your sword. Cut off my hand now!”

Friedhelm shouted, pleaded to Duke. His words made Duke feel like he read the turmoil going on inside him. His mind knew what he had to do, but his heart could follow with it. Duke shook his head and refused to follow Friedhelm's wish.

“Do you think I can do that?!”

“Yes, you can. Now draw out your sword and cut my hand. Don't let Leti die!”

“But...”

“I'm no delicate flower. I won't die with one less hand. Please, don't let me do this!”

As Duke braced himself for what he was about to do, Leti's consciousness came back; the measly amount of air that entered her system when Duke loosened Friedhelm's grip for a moment was enough to bring her back. She understood immediately what was happening based on Friedhelm and Duke's exchange and started to take action to escape her predicament.

'Knight sword, descend upon me and drop your sheath at the back of his neck!'

Leti drew out of thin air the knight sword and dropped it at Friedhelm's nape. Friedhelm lost his grip due to the impact. Duke did not comprehend what had happened, but he knew this was his chance. He successfully separated Friedhelm and Leti.

"Princess! Are you alive!?"

Leti choked at the sudden gush of air passing through her throat. Duke was relieved upon hearing that, since it meant that she was alive. He drew out his sword, ready to make the next move. In front of him was his best friend, clenching the paper knife, preparing as well for his next attack.

"What the heck is this all about?"

"I don't know as well. The only thing I'm certain about is that someone's manipulating my body to move against my will!"

"Is there really nothing you can do?"

“Tried already, but to no avail. Though I’m sure the paper knife’s the cause of this.”

Duke did not know what to do. Behind him was an alive Leti who had nearly died, and in front of him was a puppet-like Friedhelm preparing to attack.

“Please Duke, just cut my hand!”

“Your Highness...”

Duke searched for an answer on what he should do. *‘This is not about what I SHOULD do but what I WANT to do.’*

Friedhelm was Duke’s best friend. He was happy when this friend of his invited him to be his knight – his friend that would’ve been king. He truly appreciated the invitation despite turning it down due to the circumstances of his family. It would be a lie if he said he did not regret turning down an invitation to be one of the Seventh Heaven, a chivalric order composed of only the best of the best.

But Duke still held his sword tighter, more determined.

True, Friedhelm would’ve been a good king, and he was proud of that. In the end, he was not able to get the crown, but he still wanted to be Friedhelm’s knight. But he knew that all of these emotions were mere extensions of his *friendship* with him. He wouldn’t have noticed this fact if he did not learn recently that the desire to protect someone was a whole different feeling.

'Then who is it you want to protect?' Duke asked himself.

"This is a piece of cake for you. Take a look at the difference in the reach of the weapons! Do it in one clean sweep. I don't wanna let Leti see this."

"...Got it. Sorry."

There wasn't time left for him to think. He could only do what he could. Duke prepared himself to deliver one clean hit so that his friend wouldn't have to suffer long. He took one step to the side to block Leti's sight.

"...These two stupid show-off buffoons!"

Leti was still in a bit of a daze, but she clearly understood the situation. She punched the ground, venting off her anger.

'You idiots! It does not matter if Onii-sama loses his hand here or even die because Duke will just be the next slave! I have to eradicate the shadow!'

Leti focused her eyes onto Friedhelm's shadow and saw a thread-like darkness at his feet, unnaturally connected to his own. She knew that if she followed that thread, it would lead her to the host, but that was not her top priority for now.

'Come lightning and descend to the ground!'

Leti called out one of the Promise Swords, the Lightning Sword. To answer her call, the heavily clouded skies parted and blinding, bluish-white lightning flashed. Its light erased the

shadows in the area for a moment. The light was followed by a deafening thunder with shockwaves enough to shake the ground.

Duke and Friedhelm froze. They could not comprehend for a second what happened. Leti, unsurprised at all, checked the thread shadow by Friedhelm's feet and saw it gone. Then, Leti gave her stern command.

“Duke! Take the knife and throw it far away!”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

Duke obeyed Leti's order right away. There was something in her voice that made him believe it was the right thing to do. Duke took the knife from Friedhelm's hand and threw it as far as he could. The metallic sound of the knife hitting a pillar echoed throughout the place, and then silence spread.

“...You are back to normal, are you not?”

“Ye...ah. I'm really back...?”

Friedhelm willed his hands to move, and when it did – when his hands moved according to his own will – the fact that he had control over his body sunk in. He ran towards Leti without thinking and caged her in his arms.

“Thank goodness!”

Friedhelm's words were nothing but sincere, and Leti couldn't push him away. Leti looked up at Duke, asking for help with her

eyes but he simply shrugged his shoulders, his face saying, “Just let him be.” Duke had already placed his sword inside its sheath, but he was still holding it, prepared and on standby.

‘Onii-sama used to hug me like this when we were young...I wonder what happened...’

Leti felt her eyelids grow heavier. To add to that, the warmth and nostalgia she felt at being inside her brother’s arms made her sleepier, but she scolded herself, saying that she still had things left to be done. She had to check on the maid’s shadow, ask those two to keep their mouths shut about this incident, and then maybe get some sleep.

The first thing to do was to get rid of that paper knife, but it was now nowhere to be found. Wondering where it went, Leti scanned around the area and found a pair of green eyes floating in the shadow cast by the pillar.

‘He is the assassin from that night! So it is safe to assume that he is the host of the Ghost Energy.’

Both of them knew each other’s identities. The assassin’s sentence that night was, “Don’t tell me you’re the *Knight King*.” Duke’s wild guess of ‘Knight-less Princess’ was partly true.

‘And this revelation connects another point... How did I ever miss it?’

When did all of these incidents with assassins and Ghost Energy start? It was when Leti met *him* – he who was not a normal

knight. It was highly possible that he was in the center of all the incidents happening recently.

The assassin vanished in a puff, so Leti considered this incident as over for now. Besides, she had figured out most of the puzzle.

“Well, then, leave the rest of this incident to me,” Leti told Duke and Friedhelm as she wobbly stood up with her brother's help.

“Do you *know* what this is about?”

“To a certain extent, yes.”

“Planning on telling us?”

“Nope. You can also let her go. There is no more need to worry about her.”

Leti was moving alone from here on. She would finish that assassin who was acting as the host to the Ghost Energy, and then she'd purify it once the Ghost Energy lost its host.

“Both me and Prince Friedhelm are at fault for this incident for going around unescorted. No harm or damage was done to both parties, so let us just forget about this matter like it never happened. I shall not accept any objections.”

Leti walked towards the maid after saying her piece to check her shadow. The maid's thread might have been erased when lightning came forth.

"I almost killed you, you know!" Friedhelm cried to Leti, who was calmly rearranging the ribbon on her chest.

"As I have said, what do you mean by almost killing me?"

Both knew that Leti's words that casually threw everything out the window was her way of being considerate. Leti straightened her back, squared her shoulders, and walked away as if nothing serious had ever occurred, leaving Friedhelm and Duke standing in silence. Friedhelm broke the silence.

"Duke, sorry 'bout the wound."

"Ah, don't sweat it. It's just a scratch."

The blood on the wound caused by the paper knife was already starting to close, but if he left it exposed, he might stain the other parts of his uniform, so he wiped away the blood and tied a handkerchief around it using his other hand and mouth.

"Duke, be Leti's knight."

"Huh...?"

"She knows *something*."

Duke already had a gut feeling that Leti wasn't telling them everything, and some moments during the incident a while ago

strengthened this belief. Leti's actions after the lightning struck had the impression that she knew it was coming and was waiting for it compared to him and Friedhelm, who were momentarily dazed in surprise. Then after the lightning, Friedhelm was free again.

“Yeah, she probably does,” agreed Duke.

“She has the ability to uncover everything about this. I know she can. But if you did not come, I'd probably have killed my sister with my own hands. She's yet to learn that there are things she cannot handle alone.”

If Duke had not appear at that moment, Leti would not have regained her consciousness, and would have ended up being killed by Friedhelm's hands. Death for any human being is imminent. A simple unexpected turn of events could lead to one's demise. Friedhelm was asking Duke to be the knight that would always be by Leti's side in case anything unforeseen were to happen.

“If you're gonna say that you cannot make a decision because of your friendship to me and your responsibility to Guido... Then let me tell you this. Be Leti's knight. Be the knight that'll protect her.”

But Duke did not nod.

“I refuse. I am a free man moving of my own free will.”

“Then I ask you as her brother. You're the only one who I can trust my sister with!”

“I still refuse. I told you, I only move based on my own volition. No amount of persuasion or urging can make me change my mind. Even if it comes from you.”

“Duke!”

Duke walked away, never looking back at the frustrated Friedhelm calling out to him.

Duke was a tall man with long legs. If he walked faster, his long strides could cover the same distance a kid would by running. He was able to catch up with Leti in no time and called out to her.

“Oi!”

Leti stopped in her tracks and turned around.

“The only person allowed to address me in such a way is my husband, but I shall not be choosing one who would dare call me so. Anyway, what would your business be?”

“I’ve got something to tell you... Can we go someplace else? This isn’t a good place for it.”

Leti thought that she would be asked about the truth behind the paper knife incident, so she warned Duke that she’d only answer questions she felt like answering to. “Yes, of course. But let me tell you this first. I will choose whether I answer your questions or not.”

“I'll say what I want to say. Let's go.”

“Wait a minute!”

Duke grabbed Leti's wrist and dragged her without hesitation. Leti had to jog to keep up with his pace.

“Hey! Let go of me. Did I not agree already to come with you?”

Of course, they were not holding hands like couples do. It was obvious that Duke was forcibly dragging Leti somewhere, but one could not be sure how other people would interpret such a situation. Leti was worried about that.

“I also have a situation to deal with here, so just keep up.”

Duke continued walking and pulling Leti's arm, ignoring her complaints. He looked different than usual; he was not his normal, stoic self.

Is he angry about something...? No. It's more like he was driven into a corner... But why?

They reached their destination without Leti ever figuring out what was going on inside Duke's head. They were in the hearth of the castle, the King's Gallery, where the portraits of the kings of the past were exhibited. Duke finally let go of Leti's hand and let out a deep, heavy sigh.

“I should be the one sighing here... Well, what is it you wanted to talk about?”

Leti had some inkling on what he would ask. It could be how Friedhelm came back, or how he was controlled. She was already preparing herself and thinking of how much she should tell him when Duke asked something totally unexpected.

“What’s a knight for you?”

Leti was momentarily caught off guard by Duke’s question, but she was able to recover quickly and chose the words for her answer.

“A knight, for me, is nothing but decoration. I do not need, nor do I wish, to be protected. As long as my knight has the abilities necessary to convince the people that he is worthy to be one, then he shall be by my side as an ornament. I do not expect him to give me protection or support.”

Leti was almost invincible with her powers from being the reincarnation of the Knight King. No one would believe her if she told this to anyone, but she really had no need for guards and knights.

“Being alone means I can move the way I wish to. Having someone beside me would slow me down, and it is too much trouble... But... because of you, I’ve changed my mind a little. If you were not there a while ago, I would be dead. Now, I think it is better to at least have one by my side than none at all. ...Thank you for saving Onii-sama from becoming a murderer.”

Duke clenched his teeth upon hearing Leti's words.

'She really isn't an adorable young lady at all – like calling Prince Friedhelm 'Onii-sama' when he's nowhere to hear it, or even saying 'thank you for saving me.' Who would want to protect a lady like her?'

Leti returned Duke's question to him.

"Supporting the king, for me, is not part of a knight's job. If he needs mental or emotional support, let his lovers do that. If he needs political aid, then let his prime minister do that for him. If there is one thing for me to do as his knight, that is to lead the army in case of emergency. But with this peaceful time, I doubt there'd be any need for that."

The Royal Chivalric Order automatically became Sommevesle's army in time of war. The knights of the Order would be the ones to lead and take on the officer posts for the army of scouted citizens. But in a peaceful era such as this, surely something else would be expected from a knight.

"What I think a knight should do is stay beside his master at all times, ready to take care of the mundane, troublesome things so that his master can focus on the things that should be done."

"Mundane and troublesome things?"

"Take what happened earlier, for example. You could have just told me, 'I leave the rest to you,' and left."

Leti noticed immediately that Duke's words were in contrast to what she said a while ago, "Leave the rest about this incident to me."

"...What are you pointing at?"

"It means that I at least know what you're thinking. If you tell me that you will leave it to me, I will clean up the mess left behind the incident. I would know at least what you want me to do. I'll come up with a believable explanation for the maid about what happened and even search for the mastermind for all of this."

"You mean..."

Leti's heart quickened, for she was starting to understand what Duke was implying with his words.

"All you have to do is focus on your tasks as the Queen and as the ruler of the kingdom and leave the rest to me. Do what it is you have to do. So...Let me stay by your side."

Duke silently apologized to Friedhelm.

I've decided to be the knight of this not-so-charming lady. This is of my volition and will, and certainly not because you asked me to.'

"I'm fairly certain that I am the only one who can be your knight. A knight that will accept completely, no explanations needed, that you possess something you cannot speak of – a knight that can catch your drift and move according to your wishes. Am I right? Or am I right?"

Why in the world is this man saying the words she has longed to hear for so long? She wanted to cry out of happiness, but she blinked her tears back and gave Duke her signature confident and haughty smile. She did not want to be perceived as a princess who would cry because of joy. She wanted to be the queen who would simply nod since it was the outcome she was expecting all along.

“...Are you certain of your decision?”

“Yes. But,” Duke lifted up two of his fingers, “I have two conditions.”

“One, I don’t want to be the most tolerable among the rejects. Say that I am better than anyone in Seventh Heaven, Valkyrie or the present Knights of the Round. Say that I’m the best.”

During the first time she invited Duke to be her knight, she had said that he was the best among the “rejects,” and Duke’s pride couldn’t accept that.

“I understand. You are worthy of those words. You are the best among everyone else. Will that do?”

“Yes. Next, once I become your knight, trust me. Tell me everything you can. I, at least, have that right.”

More than Leti's stubbornness, it was her secretiveness Duke hated the most.

“I see your point. Once you become my knight, I shall tell you everything I can.”

Duke, satisfied with getting Leti's agreements to both of his conditions, took out his sword from its belt and gave it to Leti, complete with its sheath.

“Here, can you hold it? You do know how it’s done, right?”

“We will do it here? A knight’s investiture will not be complete unless there are witnesses.”

“If you’re looking for a witness, you’ve got a lot of them here.”

Duke looked at the portraits hung on the wall. The two of them gazed at the nineteen rulers, kings and queens that reigned over Sommevesle through the years.

“You’ve got Lion King Alexander and Administrative King Karlheinz here. They’re your aspirations, right? I’m sure you’d want them to stand as your witness.”

Duke added jokingly that he did not see the One-armed King, though.



Frustration, happiness, sadness and many other emotions she could no longer name – there was a whirlwind of emotions inside of her upon hearing Duke’s words. She took Duke’s sword to mask the raging storm inside her. She hurriedly carried it with two hands, since she did not expect the sword to be that heavy. The Knight Sword was a part of Leti, so she did not feel any weight in wielding it. So when she took Duke’s sword, she had been expecting the same weight. She was unsure if she could steadily hold it with one hand, but with sheer will power, she was able to draw it out of its sheath.

Duke kneeled before Leti and bowed his head. Leti placed the sword on Duke’s left shoulder, then opened her lips, asking Duke, “With a sword on thy right and a shield on thy left, dost thou swear allegiance to me till the day thou die?”

Of course Leti knew the words for the Knight’s Oath. She was asked to repeat and practice it countless of times as a child. She had thought that when the time came for her to utter those words, it would be purely mechanical, but she was proven wrong. It was a new discovery, and new discoveries were always welcome.

“With a sword on my right and a shield on my left, I swear allegiance to thee till the day I die.”

Leti nodded at the end of Duke’s oath and tapped his shoulders thrice with the sword. Instead of feeling merely happy, she was gratified to have the man she chose become her knight.

“From now on, thou art my knight.”

Leti retuned the sword to its sheath halfway and gave it Duke. Duke received the sword, stood up and closed the sword completely; the high-pitched sound of the sword returning to its sheath marked the end of Duke's Knighting Ceremony.

“...I shall still host a formal debut ceremony for your investiture. It shall be a grand celebration, so you'd better prepare yourself.”

The private ceremony they had would have been enough for both, but since Leti was the next Queen, such a thing was unheard of.

“Grand?”

“Of course. It shall be attended by my family and all the members of the Royal Chivalric Order. It is the Knighting Investiture of the future First Knight of the next Knights of the Round.”

“That is... indeed... grand.”

Duke wanted to invite his parents to attend, but they might swoon with the personalities that shall be in attendance.

“By the way, you do not have to resign from the Order right away. At least until I ascend the throne. We still have few more years before that. Until then, work hard in service for the Order that has taken care of you until now.”

Duke was thankful for Leti's suggestion. There were still some things that should be taken care of, such as the turnover of duties, and quitting suddenly did not feel right for him.

“Oh, I almost forgot, I also have one condition for you.”

“Hey, shouldn’t you say those things before you made me your knight?”

Duke was about to protest but Leti hushed him down, saying it was just a simple condition.

“Burn my diary when I die.”

“Diary...?”

“I only write my complaints and rants there. I might wish to die again if I was were known in the future as the ‘Rant Queen.’ Are we clear?”

And naturally, anyone who would hear such words would want to know what was inside.

“When you die, can I read it?”

“Well, you can, though I think I will be writing more about you from now on.”

Leti thought of telling Duke the truth behind what happened today. The truth about her being the reincarnation of the Knight King Christian, and that the perpetrator was a weapon created by his enemies of the Knight King to kill him, and that Friedhelm was

saved by the lightning she called. But thinking about that already made her imagine Duke not believing her story, and she would probably write the whole scenario about it and complain it was Duke who made her tell him, and yet he was the one not believing her story.

Surely days like those would increase, and Leti thought those days might not be so bad at all.

Leti went back immediately to the Royal Villa without dwelling much about Duke's knighting, saying she still had things to do. Duke, left alone in the Gallery, paid his respects to the kings of the past and made another vow.

"I shall put my life on the line to keep my oath."

With that vow in his heart, he relaxed at last, and all the tension in his body was lifted, making him feel the sudden exhaustion because of his nervousness.

"You were too nervous, Duke," Duke said to himself. He had forcibly dragged Leti and made her knight him so that he would not falter in his decision. When he told Leti to make him her knight, he was so nervous, he was really glad he did not choke on his words.

“Seeing you stutter due to nerves would’ve been a breath of fresh air and quite entertaining, but I guess I’m asking for too much.”

“Your Highness!?”

A cheery Friedhelm came out of the shadows.

“I already settled things the way Leticia would want it. After I untied the maid, I woke her up and said that she had passed out for a while and that what happened was just a dream.”

“I see. Thank you.”

“With that, we’re quits. And to think you said those big words to me... But here you are, her knight.”

Duke grumbled something and scratched the back of his head in embarrassment upon knowing that Friedhelm was watching them.

“Her Highness and I are both neutrals; we can understand each other. Besides, the First Seat of the Knights of the Round is such a tempting position. It really isn’t a bad offer if you think about it.”

Duke flatly rejected Leti's forceful invitation right from the start. However, as he got to know her, he learned how the seventeen year old Leti, who could still be called a girl, had a steel-hard resolution to carry the responsibilities of a Queen and a ruler of a country. It did not take long for him to start wanting to

protect her. The main reason why he had not agreed to be her knight was because he had his doubts.

“I was not sure whether I could choose between you and Princess Leticia without any doubt clouding my mind. But...”

When Friedhelm confronted him once that being Leti's knight meant being able to kill Friedhelm if he was ordered to, Duke knew that he could not do it without faltering then. He knew that he was not worthy to be her knight.

“...Sorry, Your Highness. If ordered to, I might have to kill you.”

“I don't mind at all, you bloke. Protect her with your life. If you fail to do that, come to me and offer your neck as apology.”

“Roger that.”

Duke smiled wryly at the royal siblings voicing out their concern for the other when they are not around, and then Duke came to realize one important thought.

Maybe Her Highness wanted her two older brothers to stand as witnesses as well....’

Duke was convinced that it was something Leti would've wanted.

“...At least half of that came true.”

Duke groaned again, thinking that his understanding of Leti was not yet enough, for right now, he was debating whether he should tell her or not about Friedhelm's presence.



“That was quite the show...”

Leti went to the Knight King's Space to report her success in getting the man she wanted to be her knight. Then when One-armed King Oswald asked what made Duke change his mind since he was so repulsive of the notion before, Leti gladly told him the series of happenings that led to this happy conclusion and he could not help but admire what happened.

“Really? In my opinion, I think being helped when I was nearly dying is humiliating. Is being seen as miserable and pitiable really something to be worried about?”

“If that happened to a man, it would have ended in simple sympathy, but for a lady, any man who saw that would want to protect her.”

“I really cannot comprehend that.”

“If you did, you would be a devious lady.”

Leti agreed with it and stood up, saying she'd be going back now.

Chapter II – The Princess' Tea Party

“Eh, are you going already?”

“Yes. I only wanted to brag about my new knight.”

Leti could only have this kind of conversation here in the Knight King's Space. No one in the real world would be able to notice it, but Leti's head was in cloud nine.

End of Chapter II

OKOBORE HIME TO ENTAKU NO KISHI

The Leftover Princess and the Knights of the Round

Story by: Riine Ishida

Art by: Ichiko Okiya

Brought to you by:

[AQUA Scans](#)

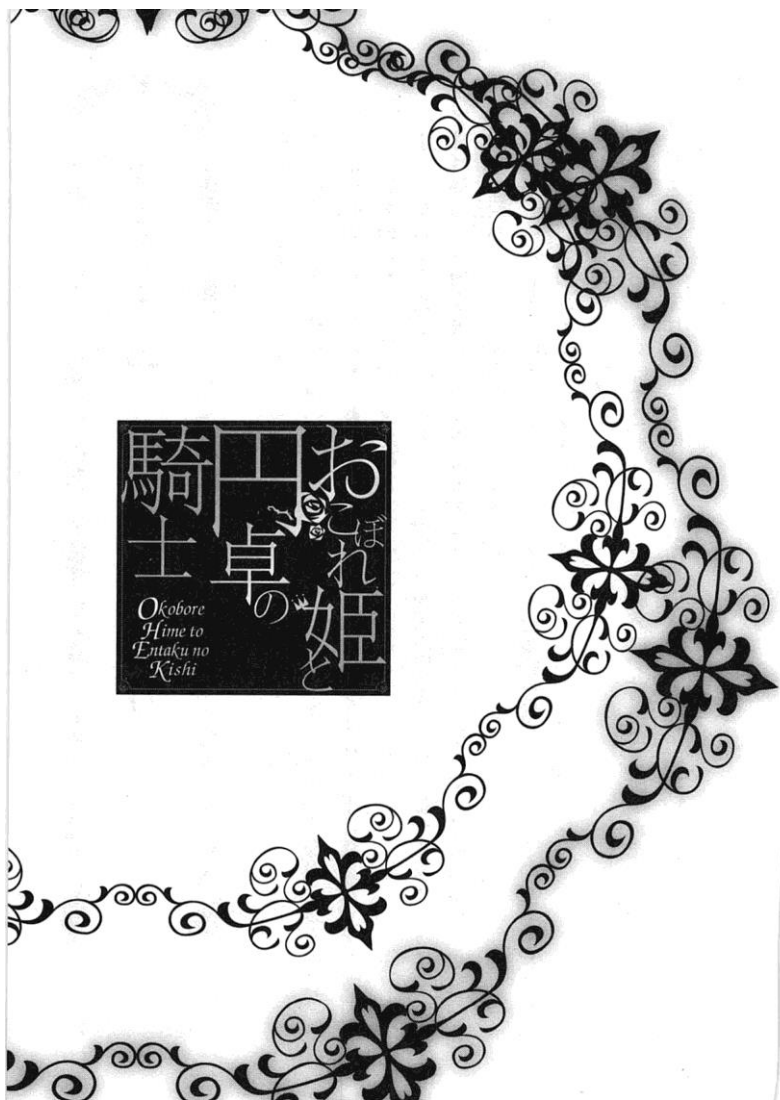
Credits:

- ❖ Raws: Icarus Bride
- ❖ Translation: Crystal Hikari
- ❖ Proofreading: Fallinwind
- ❖ Quality Checking: Mizuouji

Translator's notes:

The Japanese honorifics were kept in the translation of the dialogues of the characters to show the respect or adoration shown by the characters. Footnotes were provided upon the first appearance of the honorific in the chapter to explain it.

Thoughts are signified by '*italics*'.



CHAPTER III THE KNIGHT AND THE ASSASSIN

The Royal family of Sommevesle, the high ranking officials of the Royal Chivalric Order and all knights not on guarding duty gathered in the Great Hall of the Royal Castle for an important ceremony. The atmosphere inside the Hall was tense. An event as grand as this was very rare and all those in attendance would serve as witnesses as their future queen knighted the Knight of the First Seat of her Knights of the Round.

Astrid, seated at the back in the audience seat, gazed from afar his senior and the princess he so admired.

‘This is my first time seeing a knighting ceremony.’

When Astrid heard that Duke accepted Leti’s invitation to be her knight, he asked his senior why because Duke had hated the notion before. And Duke’s answer was, “—because she is a master worth offering my life to.”

That was probably the answer Astrid was hoping to hear all along. When he asked other knights why they swore loyalty to their masters, most of their answers were because of duty or because they were invited.

‘They will truly mean every word in the Knight’s Oath.’

Leti wanted Duke to be her knight. Duke wanted Leti to be his master. This was how the Knight’s Oath should be, both parties wishing for the other. Astrid enviously looked at the two persons he respected.

Leti, in her beautiful white dress, stood in front of Duke, who was kneeling on one knee with his head bowed deeply.

“With a sword on thy right and a shield on thy left, dost thou swear loyalty to me till the day thou die?” The master’s dignified voice filled the Great Hall like a wonderful melody. Then the knight, with an equally dignified voice, answered his master’s call.

“With a sword on my right and shield on my left, I swear loyalty to thee, my master, till the day I die.”

“Thou art my knight.”

Leti passed on the half-closed sword to Duke. Duke then returned the sword to its sheath, and this metallic sound declared to all that the knighting ceremony was over. The crowd cheered and applauded. Astrid joined in his hands as well.

‘...But I wonder why...’

Astrid couldn’t comprehend why he suddenly wanted to stain Leti’s immaculately white dress scarlet.

Leti could no longer be the carefree princess she was before. In other words, she couldn’t let herself be occupied about the assassin incident any longer. She had to prioritize her responsibilities as the crown princess, and today’s tea party was part of that.

“Duke, stay here. A maid shall come to show you the way to a drawing room where you can stay for the while.”

Leti left Duke and opened an ornate door with her one hand since the other was occupied with a big basket.

“A good day to you Prince Guido, Prince Friedhelm, today’s weather is perfect for a tea party, is it not?”

The weather was a heavily clouded sky, as if representing the relationship between the three eldest royal children of Sommevesle. Leti was the one who suggested for the three of them – Friedhelm, Guido and her – to have a private tea party on their own without any outsiders. However, even Leti was not sure whether they could really hold a simple conversation that was even long enough for the tea to go cold.

“What is inside that basket?” asked Guido, the prince with the classic beauty despite his normally grumpy face.

Guido, the Second Prince of Sommevesle, shared the same steel-blue eyes and golden locks with Leti. Even Leti, who was undeniably confident about her own beauty, openly admitted her defeat to Guido. Both the jovial, amiable Friedhelm and the cold, serious Guido were Leti’s half brothers. But Leti and Guido looked so similar one would forget they were born from different mothers.

“I baked a cake for this particular occasion. I knew for certain you would be serving us tea alone.”

Leti took off the white coverlet of the basket and took out a small wooden box.

“Sweets are banned here.”

“Stop nagging, you’re a man. Try and learn something from Leticia,” Friedhelm jokingly said to his fussy younger brother.

Guido warned them again not to litter cake crumbs in his villa, and then asked the maid to bring out some plates and cutlery for the cake. Leti deftly cut it into six slices and placed a slice on a plate for each of them. But no one dared to lift a fork and taste the cake.

“...How about taking a bite? I did not poison it.”

“Then why don’t you take a sip of tea? I didn’t poison it either.”

“Well... I just remembered there was this recent poisoning incident that happened and... *Aaahhh*... I knew this would happen!” Friedhelm grudged, slouching on his chair.

It was already expected that the three of them couldn’t possible have a peaceful tea party. The only reason Friedhelm agreed to Leti’s suggestion of harassing Guido with cakes and tea was because he still felt guilty about the last incident¹. He also understood what Leti wanted to achieve with this tea party and he

¹ See Chapter II.

was in perfect agreement that they had a lot of patching up to do with regards to their filial relationship.

“I shall be eating the same cake as you will. So if you die, I shall as well.”

“You baked the cake and cut it yourself. Of course I’d be cautious.”

“I could not possibly do such a complicated thing of separating the poisoned portion with the normal one. If anything outside of the recipe was mixed in to the batter, the cake would no longer rise.”

Leti, irritated how things were going, dumped the slices of cake on their plates into the box and shook it.

“Oil”

“If I do this, you would no longer mind at all, would you? If this cake is truly poisoned, then they shall find our corpses together.”

Leti continued on shaking the box, producing unpleasant, squishy sounds that perfectly reflected the chaos happening inside the shaking box. Her two older brothers said not a word to stop her.

“I guarantee you the taste. It will be the same as before but I doubt it will be presentable.”

Leti divided again the squished cake for the three of them indifferently. Friedhelm looked at the pitiful cake and whispered to his younger brother.

“Hey, I already feel bad for what I did, better be one too. *Geez*, why do *I*, of all people, have to eat a cake like this?”

“...Me too...”

Friedhelm took a bite of the cake and couldn't help exclaiming his surprise to its taste. True, the cake no longer looked appetizing, but it was delicious.

“Didn't think you could bake. This is good.”

Guido nodded in agreement to Friedhelm's compliment.

“What's today's business?” asked Guido.

“We shall only have small talk for today's tea party, Prince Guido. I do believe you are aware that I have gained my first knight a few days ago.”

“Yes. I see you have started to settle in.”

Guido thought that the topic would be a bragging contest about their knights, but Leti's small talk didn't end in small talk.

“I have a suggestion, and I think this will be fair for everyone. What do you say about giving me some of your knights, four from Seventh Heaven² and five from Valkyrie³?”

“I refuse,” said the two princes.

“What a pity,” was Leti’s nonchalant reply to the immediate rejection of her brothers. She took a sip of tea. She didn’t feel any sting to her tongue, so she was sure the tea was not poisoned.

“That ain’t small talk, that’s business. Small talk means more trivial topics such as asking how things are going with your lover, or something along those lines,” explained Friedhelm.

“Lover?” Leti asked, tilting her head to one side.

“Duke?”

“Oh. Well, his face is a little different from my tastes.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Your ideal face is that of Lion King Alexander, right? I really don’t get what you see in him. I mean, that portrait he has in the Gallery could warrant him the title, ‘Serial Killer King.’”

“Well then, in the living, who is the best one you like? I shall search for the one that will best fit your tastes.”

“Play fair, Guido!”

² Friedhelm’s private chivalric order

³ Guido’s private chivalric order

And in the end, their supposedly casual tea party ended up to be a business meeting over tea and cake.

While the tea party of the eldest royal children was becoming a true business meeting, Duke was waiting for his master in the drawing room usually used by the knights of Valkyrie. However, the room today was empty, so Duke simply took a random book to pass time. As he was absent-mindedly reading a line of poetry, a knock echoed in the room.

“Please excuse me... Oh, Senpai⁴!”

Astrid’s head came peeking in from the door. The two knights were surprised to see each other in such an unlikely place and asked the other what they were doing there.

“I’m on escort duties to my master. I’m waiting here till their tea party ends. How ‘bout you? Since when did you enter Valkyrie?”

“Ah, no, I was being recruited and they told me to take a look at how they work.”

Duke then understood why Astrid was called to Guido’s villa. Astrid was the number one unaffiliated rookie of the Royal Chivalric Order. He was also being recruited to Friedhelm’s

⁴ Senpai – a Japanese honorific used in addressing one’s senior

Seventh Heaven and Duke thought Astrid might be joining either one in the near future.

“Then, Her Highness is here?”

“Surprised? I did not believe it either, but ‘tis true, and even Prince Friedhelm is here.”

Duke wanted to add that such a gathering would be more believable if Leti said they’d have a confidential meeting or matters to discuss with each other when he noticed the change in Astrid’s eyes.

“Princess Leticia... is here.”

Astrid’s normally gentle green eyes turned into a murky moss color upon uttering Leti’s name. Duke thought it might just be his imagination, but his instincts told him to be on guard.

“You’re waiting for Prince Guido, right? Why don’t you accompany me for a while?”

Duke did not want to leave Astrid alone. He threw his book away and tapped his fingers on the chess board.

After some time – enough for two servings of tea to get cold – a maid came in relaying a message that the tea party was already over. Duke stood up, deciding in his mind what to say to Leti, whether he’d express his surprise that it ended early, or his congratulations for being able to keep a normal conversation for that long.

“Next time, I shall bake cookies that are so identical to each other; you will not be able to tell the difference. So brace yourselves for that.”

Duke raised his hand a little to inform Leti of his presence as his master was leaving her brothers with her gruesome goodbye.

“Oh, Astrid, since when did you join Valkyrie?” asked the surprised Leti when she saw Astrid standing behind Duke. Astrid blushed and violently shook his head sideways, clarifying that he was just there to observe Valkyrie and had not joined them.

“And here I was thinking to have Astrid fill in the seat I reserved for Duke in Seventh Heaven. Hey, Duke, why don’t you help me in convincing him?”

“Unfortunately, I am the type who lets my juniors fend for themselves. Princess Leticia, if you would excuse me, I’d like to ask for a few moments with Prince Friedhelm.”

“You may.”

“Until I return, please stay by Prince Guido’s side.”

It was the best way Duke could think of to warn Leti about Astrid since he could not say it directly. He then took his leave and signaled Friedhelm with his eyes to follow him.

“What’s the matter? Is this something you don’t want Leticia to hear? Like some problems on your night life?”

Duke sighed deeply at Friedhelm's misunderstanding and told him it was something serious.

"It's about Astrid. You already have him investigated, don't you? You are recruiting him for Seventh Heaven after all."

"Of course I had. I'm recruiting him."

"...What about his past?"

"Clear."

"...Clear? I see."

Duke was already starting to feel relieved when Friedhelm clarified his answer.

"Clear, as in blank. No matter how much we searched and investigated him, we found nothing. You do know what this implies, right?"

'Nothing' meant Astrid did not come from normal society.

"From the scarce information we got, it seems like he was a former mercenary, though unaffiliated to any guild. But that still warrants him as 'criminal' in this world."

"And yet you're still recruiting him for your Seventh Heaven?"

"Better to have him on my side than the enemy's. Guido obviously thought of that as well."

The ever-so-meticulous and careful Second Prince definitely already had Astrid investigated and came up with the same conclusion as Friedhelm – that Astrid would a better pawn than any other normal knight. Or to put it in a different way, if he was not yours, then you’d better be careful around him.

With Duke and Friedhelm having their own conversation, the three – Leti, Guido and Astrid – were left to their own devices. Astrid, being considerate, took a few steps away from the royal siblings and did not join in their conversation.

Leti positioned herself somewhere near Guido so she could shield him if anything happened, and she could still keep an eye out for Astrid.

“Is Queen Sophia doing well? I have not had the time to visit her recently.”

Leti began a conversation with Guido while monitoring Astrid’s actions. Guido, as requested by Duke, decided to accompany Leti until her knight returned.

“The last time I had visited her was four months ago.”

“Then there is no point in me asking you since the last time I visited her was three months ago.”

“Do visit her more often. I’m sure she’d be glad to see you.”

“I really want to, but things have been difficult and complicated ever since I became the crowned princess.”

Guido’s mother, the Second Queen Consort Sophia, used to adore Leti. She treated Leti like a much younger sister when Leti’s mother died. She was a very warm and kind person and used to tell Leti to “take care of Guido.”

I am sure it meant to help Guido once he became the king... But...’

Leti did not return Queen Sophia’s kindness with resentment, but she was doing something near that so it was hard to face her.

“You could have easily come up with a clear decision for this,” whispered Leti. She wanted to be like Guido, who could clearly divide things between their merits and demerits, between what would be advantageous for him or not. But she couldn’t make herself think that way despite knowing it was the best way for a ruling queen. Leti silently admitted the only common thing she and Guido shared was their looks.

Duke and Friedhelm came back only a few moments after they had just left.

“Prince Friedhelm, Prince Guido, if you would please excuse me...” Leti bid her brothers goodbye and let Duke carry the emptied basket.

“...I would not go as far as to call it meaningful tea party, but it was not meaningless either,” continued Leti.

“Well, I think it was meaningless since we did not come up with at least one agreement of sorts despite having the three of us present,” Friedhelm declared, despite knowing Leti’s true intentions for the tea party. Guido did not say anything, but he was most likely in agreement with his older brother.

“I did not suggest this tea party to have any agreements between us. But if you feel it to be so meaningless, then let me make it meaningful now. I shall tell you a hint for my ideal husband. You did ask me about that earlier,” Leti said to her brothers with a confident smirk on her face.

“My first love, or rather first loves, were Friedhelm-onii-sama⁵ and Guido-onii-sama. A pleasant day to you...” Leti curtsied and was about to turn around when Friedhelm grabbed her arm to stop her. He looked at Leti with eyes full of sincerity that any other lady would have swooned and fell for him with his gaze alone.

“Leticia, no, Leti. I...I have hidden this for the longest time. I am actually my mother’s illegitimate son. She had an affair with a different man and I was the fruit of their relationship.”

“I do not have anything against your perfect delivery and timing but I find it irritating,” Leti rebutted immediately to her brother’s joke. Friedhelm was nothing else but an older brother to her.

⁵ Onii-sama: Onii =Older Brother | Sama = formal honorific for a high person

“There was actually a rumor during the time of my birth that I was switched at birth and...” Now, it was Guido taking his turn.

“You should practice more in your delivery of jokes because you make it sound truthful,” was Leti’s reply.

Leti was trying to figure out in her head whether Guido said his spiel because he thought it will be profitable for him or if he was just simply going with the flow of the moment. Leti sighed, feeling the heaviness of having stupid brothers. She signaled Duke to get ready and they soon left Guido’s villa, leaving behind Friedhelm, Guido, and Astrid.

“Aaaah! Please don’t worry about me! I promise not to mention this to anyone! I swear!” exclaimed Astrid.

Friedhelm suddenly felt all the tension in him disappear with Astrid’s unexpected reaction. Guido, on the other hand, was already analyzing the hint Leti gave and tried to come up with any point of similarity between them. He came up with the conclusion that Leti probably liked blondes.

Meanwhile, Astrid felt relieved upon hearing Friedhelm’s explanation and had his misunderstanding, about Friedhelm being an illegitimate son and Guido being switched at birth, cleared. Then he heard a voice whisper to him.

“Today’s not the best time to do it. Kill her some other time.”

The voice did not belong to either Friedhelm or Guido, but Astrid did not find anyone else around.

“Huh?”

“What’s wrong, Astrid?”

Astrid took another look around, but there was no one else in the area.

“I thought I heard a voice but... it might just be my imagination,” Astrid replied, his hands sweating coldly for some unknown reason.

Duke immediately took his leave from his master after he had escorted her back to the Royal Villa. It would be his shift soon, and he had to return to the Royal Chivalric Order’s camp. However, he remembered something and turned around to ask Leti.

“Your Highness, what’s your opinion on Astrid? Do you want him as your knight?”

“As I had said before, taking him in will be troublesome. Any master who wishes to have him must be fully prepared to accept him.”

Astrid was someone who unconsciously killed the sound of his footsteps despite jumping down from a high place. That feat alone

showed how much he had absorbed in his person the habits of an assassin. To add to that, he was currently the most likely suspect as the Ghost Energy's host. Leti could not make him her knight even if she wanted to.

“I see.” Duke's eyes clearly showed relief in Leti's answer.

Leti wanted to dig deeper into the topic because it was Duke who had kept on recommending Astrid to be her knight in the past.

“Is there anything wrong with Astrid?”

“No, nothing.”

Duke still was not certain and had no proof that Astrid was the one who targeted Leti recently. It was nothing but a hunch, and he could not tell Leti about it without any proof. It was just one of the countless possibilities.

“Your Highness, if you have any business with me, don't go to the camp alone...no, don't go there even if you're not alone. Send a word and I will come here as soon as possible.”

Leti obediently nodded to Duke's warning and they parted ways – Duke to the camp and Leti to her room. Upon coming back to her room, she went by the window and looked out to where the Order's camp was, thinking about her knight and her knight's junior.

'Duke is trying to prevent any contact between me and Astrid. I see he has noticed already.'

Duke would most likely investigate and monitor Astrid as much as he could. Though it was the right thing to do for a knight, his actions might limit the Ghost Energy's activity and this would work against Leti's plan to finish this case as early as possible. Leti liked smart men, but a less smart one would have been better for this situation.

"Well, if that is the case, this will be the best opportunity for me to see how far he would go."

How far would Duke go as her knight?

Leti did not want to involve Duke any further with the Ghost Energy, but since he was already having his own suspicions, it would already be impossible to stop him. So the best way to deal with this was to use Duke and let the Ghost Energy move as it pleased. That way Duke would have to choose between her and Astrid, in the end. And if she was not chosen, the wound from that would not be too deep.

"No, Leti! That is *not* how you want yourself to be... You do not want to be that kind of queen!" Leti reprimanded herself.

'You chose him to be your knight, the person you can trust. It is the weakness of your heart that stops you from trusting him.'

"Do not *use* Duke... *believe* him."

If Astrid was really the Ghost Energy host, then she would not let Duke be connected to it, even if she had to order him so. If Astrid was just a former assassin, then she would give Duke the freedom to do as he pleased until he was satisfied, and she would not utter a word about it. The most important point for this case was to move as carefully as possible, even if she had to rely on Duke.

‘Please give me the courage to the step forward and the strength to believe, not the weakness to doubt.’

Leti decided to make a bet and shake Astrid a bit to see if he really was the Ghost Energy’s host. She asked her servants to investigate Astrid’s patrol shift and route. Based on the information they gathered, the best spot for her to wait for Astrid was by the North Cemetery – the place where the royalty of the past were to rest, and no one could enter it without permission. It was the best place to do something that should not be seen by other people.

Rain had poured incessantly down on Sommevesle for the past few days. So when it stopped this morning, it was the perfect day for Leti to put her plan into action. She left the castle and headed towards the North Cemetery, but upon arriving there, she heard lively and energetic voices.

“Perhaps they are visiting someone. But none of them look familiar to me.”

The clothes of the six children clearly showed they were simple commoners who thought of the cemetery's big stones and lush bushes as the perfect place to play hide and seek.

Leti was not particularly bothered with children playing in the cemetery, but she still decided to warn them like any adult would.

“Children, you should only play here during the day because monsters and ghosts come out here in the night.”

The children looked at each other, then at Leti with an unimpressed expression.

“Adults always say that, but we have never seen a monster!”

Leti was used to dealing with children because of the number of younger brothers and sisters she had. She was not annoyed nor irritated with the children's innocent impertinence, and she smilingly agreed to their observation.

“Yes, indeed. Monsters do not come out here, but a scary knight will come after you instead.”

Leti was thinking of the former assassin Astrid when a different “scary knight” appeared.

“Yeah, she's right. This isn't a playground. This is the Royal Cemetery. Go somewhere else to play.”

Leti heard a low, threatening voice from behind. She quickly turned around and found Duke, sharply glaring at her and the

children. His face was so scary and threatening, a crying child would cry louder if his face were seen. Astrid, few steps behind Duke, was surprised to see Leti outside of the Castle.

With the appearance of the scary knight, the disgruntled children left the cemetery, leaving Leti pressing her temples at how things complicated had become.

‘This is all because I was not able to fully read Duke’s actions. It was an obvious move on his part. He would change shifts to match with Astrid’s to keep an eye on him. I should have anticipated this much.’

“Are you, perhaps, alone Your Highness? I don’t see any of your guards.”

Leti thought it best to give up for now and willingly let Duke scold her and send her home.

“Yes, I am. And yes, I know. I will obediently go back to the castle,” Leti said, raising her hands in defeat, and then walked towards Astrid, who was approaching them.

“...A pleasant day, Astrid. I am glad to see you are working hard.”

“Ah... ah... It’s a pleasure to meet you here, Your Highness!”

No one would ever suspect that the stupidly blushing Astrid was a former assassin. His personality was his biggest weapon. No one could doubt him because of it. Even Leti admitted to herself

that she might have been deceived and not found out about his true identity if she did not chance upon the opportunity.

“Astrid, I will escort Her Highness back to the castle.”

Duke casually went in front of Leti to shield her from Astrid when a child tugged at Leti’s skirt. Duke was about to reprimand the child – even if he did not know who Leti was, what he did was still inexcusable. But Leti told Duke with her eyes that it was fine, and she bent her knees to meet the child’s eyes.

“Hey, have you entered the grave chamber, Miss? Do monsters really come out there?”

“There? Ah, you mean the Underground Burial Chamber where the kings lay? No, monsters do not come out there, but it is like a labyrinth, so promise me you will never go inside even if the lock is broken.”

“A labyrinth?”

“Yes. So promise me you will never go inside.”

The child nodded to affirm his promise, though his eyes were not filled with fear, but with a sparkle of curiosity instead. He ran back to his friends and shared his newly gathered information. The children were already beaming at the door to the Chamber, but decided to leave since Duke kept on glaring at them. Duke was certain those children would come back, so he explained to Astrid why no one was allowed there.

“Make sure to warn off the children whenever you see them playing around here. They are not just being disrespectful. They are putting themselves into danger. This area is secluded, and if ever they get caught up in a kidnapping incident, it’ll be difficult to get any testimonies from around here. Got that?”

Astrid soundly replied to Duke that he did. Astrid was the type of junior who obediently listened to what his seniors would say, so he was generally treated well and kindly, not only by Duke, but by the other knights as well.

“Astrid, I shall be borrowing Duke for a while. Sorry for taking him while he is still on duty.”

“No, it’s fine, Your Highness! I can do the patrol alone! Please take care on your way,” Astrid said as he waved his hand, sending Leti and Duke off.

“The master and her knight...” Astrid sighed, gazing at them walking towards the castle.

Duke was just recently knighted, but seeing them side by side was so natural that it looked like they had been together for a much longer time. He felt proud seeing his senior that way and wished that someday, maybe he could also have a master like that.

And then a voice spoke.

“Why didn’t you kill her? It was just one useless man! It was the perfect opportunity to do it!”

Astrid looked around but found no one who could be the source of the voice.

“...Who...said that? Was that...me?”

Astrid had been hearing this strange voice recently, and he knew not who owned it. Or maybe he did.

Will I just really be an assassin? Can I not be a knight like Senpai? Astrid thought, and his fists clenched until his knuckles turned white. He thought the voice was from the deep darkness in his heart because it was the only explanation he could think of.

Duke followed the ever-so-elegant Leti as they walked back to the castle. He wanted to reprimand her about several things, but decided not to waste his energy. He knew full well that his words would fall on deaf ears. So instead, he pointed out a different thing.

“What you said earlier was not a good warning at all.”

“Earlier?”

“You told those kids that the chamber was like a labyrinth, so they should never enter it. That was like telling them to go inside and explore it! Fortunately, the door to the Royal Burial Chamber is tightly locked, and there is no chance of them getting inside.”

Even if the children wanted to explore the Royal Burial Chamber, it was protected by sturdy doors and locks so they children could not possibly get inside it even if they wanted to.

Duke told Leti not to worry much about it, but she still cast her eyes down in thought, contemplating whether she should tell him about a certain secret only known among the royal family. In the end, she decided to leave it for now and changed the topic.

“You talk to me respectfully when we are public.”⁶

“I put at least that much distinction in public. But if you wish, I shall speak with you in such a formal manner from now on.”

“I have not reprimanded you about it recently, have I? I have my reasons.”

“Now that you mention it...” Duke wondered what made Leti change her mind, and his master proudly provided him the answer.

“At first, I thought you should act becoming of your status, but then I changed my mind. You are just a *youngster* son of a lowly baron.”

“I agree with the lowly baron, but I can’t accept you, a seventeen-year-old girl, calling a three and twenty year old man like me, a *youngster*.”

⁶ The distinction in Duke’s speech is not that obvious in English (sorry for the lack of talent to deliver). But in the Japanese original, it is quite distinct. In public, his language is formal and respectful (*keigo*) but when they’re alone he speaks casually to Leti like they are friends.

True, the world may still consider him a youngster, a newbie or upstart, but Leti was much younger than him – so much younger that she might not yet be still considered under the same category as him. But Leti was not bothered by Duke’s roundabout way of saying she was just a kid and even dared looking at him with teasing eyes.

“Is that so? But I do know something about you.”

“What?”

“That your face is somehow well-liked among the matrons of high society. And that your scowling face is purely intentional to intimidate and drive them away.”

Duke’s shock was stronger than the time Leti slapped him.

“What the—! Who told you that? Prince Friedhelm!?”

“No one. I just knew it. That is the reason why you are called a youngster. But if you could at least seduce or tempt a lady with that face of yours, I shall take back what I said.”

Duke wanted to answer back, “I don’t want to be told that by someone who got flustered with a pretend kiss,” but decided to swallow it all down. He did not know where this might lead, so he just backed down and scolded himself to act as the adult here.

“Ever since you, the youngster, officially took the First Seat in my Knights of the Round, I was worried whether you were being looked down on by the other knights. So I thought that if I could

show the public right from the start that you are special, we could avoid meaningless arguments.”

Leti had satisfied the minimum requirements for the “Best Knights of the Round” when she knighted Duke. All that was left was to work hard to be the *best*. However, due to her choice, some people would think that they should also be appointed as her knight due to different things, such as the influence of their family or their status in society. These self-important people were the ones that might look down on Duke as nothing but a youngster or an upstart son of a lowly baron.

“You are the only one allowed to talk to me in such a casual manner. So be thankful for having a thoughtful master willing to protect her retainer with a weak foothold.”

“Is that so? Then it is my honor to have such a generous master. But I have my own concerns as well. Take, for instance, your sweet smiles for Astrid.”

“Are you forgetting that I am the kind-hearted princess to the public? The only people I do not put up a show to are those who are close to me.”

“Close to you? How come I never encountered the kind-hearted princess? You were the haughty, high-handed queen with me right from the start.”

The first words Leti spoke to Duke were, “I appoint you as my knight. Gratefully accept the first seat in my Knights of the Round

and bow down to me.” It was Duke’s first time to encounter such hauteur. He had not even encountered that much from the arrogant Friedhelm.

“I already meant for you to be part of my inner circle from the beginning, so there was no need for pretense,” Leti asserted.

Duke was about to answer something in return when Leti continued on and asked him an unexpected question.

“...I want to confirm something. Who is stronger, you or Astrid?”

“Our results will be even for a match... at least for now.” Duke indirectly indicated that Astrid would be stronger than him in the future.

“I see,” Leti said, and looked at Duke directly, her eyes piercing and sharp.

“To judge your own abilities objectively is one of your good points. The two of you are evenly matched in a battle between knights...”

Leti’s hair swayed and danced in the wind. She quietly asked Duke, “...How about in a real battle for life?”

Duke felt the weight of Leti’s question.

“Do you remember me saying that any master who wished to take in Astrid would need much confidence and preparedness to

appoint him as a knight? I am considering taking him in. And that is because you are here now.”

Leti openly showed Duke her trust. And Duke, in turn, understood the meaning behind his master’s words – she believed Duke would be able to protect her from Astrid, and that when the need arose, Duke would be able to kill him without any hesitation.

The wind grew stronger, blowing Leti’s golden locks further, covering Duke’s sight. The wind passed and Leti’s shiny hair ceased its dance, but Duke still hadn’t answered.

“I shall give you time. Let me hear your answer then.”

Leti had asked Duke if he was prepared. He thought he was the moment he accepted the First Seat in the Knights of the Round, but...

‘I’d hesitate, for sure, but I...can kill him. But do I really have the strength to do so...?’ Duke shook his head, correcting his thoughts.

‘No, I should not even hesitate or falter, for I am the Knight of the First Seat of her Knights of the Round.’

Leti did not say anything more. She turned around and continued walking towards the castle. Duke silently followed behind.



Later that night after Leti asked her knight's resolve, she found herself in the Knight King's Space and the only other guest was the Lion King, King Alexander.

“Hey, when are you in?”

Leti answered she had just taken in her first knight. Alexander hummed silently and stood up by the window.

“Today's goodbye for me. You do know what I mean, don't you?”

Leti understood the Lion King's complicated yet simple words and asked to confirm, “Is today the eve of...”

Alexander nodded. Tomorrow was the day he would be killed by his own knight, prime minister, and best friend who would be later on known as the Revolution King.

“No! Don't go!”

“But that can't be. I will wake up and face tomorrow. I have long accepted this fate.”

Alexander did not live in Leti's time. If not for the Knight King's Space where the consciousness of the reincarnations of King Christian, the Knight King, gathered and the concept of time did not exist, they would have not known each other. But hearing Alexander would die the next day was not something easy for Leti to swallow.

“...Then promise me.”

“What?”

“That... you will live. You will live and become a pirate who will conquer the Southern Seas and be the king of a country there. That theory existed in my time so promise me you will do just as I said!”

Alexander laughed heartily and commented that it was an interesting theory.

“If I do get past this ordeal and live, I will do as you say. I’ll be a pirate, take over a country across the Southern Seas, and be their king.”

Alexander reached out his little finger to Leti, and she wrapped her own to his, making a pinky swear – just like how children sealed their promises.

“Seeing you makes me think maybe I should have had children. We may not be directly connected by blood, but having descendants ain’t bad at all.”

Alexander reprimanded Leti a lot of times, but despite his harsh words, they were still overflowing with warmth and kindness, for he considered Leti as his great-great-great-granddaughter. Leti was happy and a bit sad to be parting with Alexander, and she wanted to convey this to him.

“I...”

But her consciousness was suddenly drawn back to reality.



“Princess, we are deeply sorry to disturb you, but Sir Duke is...”

Suddenly waking up to her knight’s call caused Leti to be in a foul mood. She was in a middle of an important conversation with Alexander, but then she was able to gradually turn her temper around upon hearing the gist of the situation.

I know it was King Alexander’s last moments...but I have my own reality to prioritize!’

She told her maid to ask Duke to wait as she changed her clothes and let him in once she was ready.

“Sorry for disturbing you this late.”

“Quit the niceties. Our priority right now is to search for the children. Where exactly is the place you need permission to enter?”

“The North Cemetery. We gathered all the available knights of the Order to search around the vicinity. They were playing in that area this afternoon, so we might be able to find clues there if they were really kidnapped.”

Duke had disturbed Leti this late in the night to ask for permission to search in the North Cemetery to find any clues regarding the lost children. Technically, it was the King's permission they needed, but it was already late and they were not sure if it was acceptable for them to disturb the King. So they thought that maybe Leti, the heir to throne, could give them the permission instead, so he asked her maid to wake her up, all prepared to receive her anger.

“You may go and enter the cemetery and just report to me later.”

“If we're going to simply remind children to stay away, we wouldn't have bothered asking for permission. But if we're going to do a search, our actions might disturb the place and we need permission for that.”

“I see. I understand. I also have the biggest responsibility for this incident because of the warning I gave them which sparked their curiosity.”

“Responsibility?”

Leti nodded but did not explain any further.

“Let us hurry. Prepare me a horse, not a carriage. There is also no need for a lady's saddle.”

“Thought you'd say that. It's all prepared.”

Duke already knew Leti would join the search when he saw her maid prepare an overcoat and walking boots for her before he even went inside her room. At first, he thought he should stop Leti from coming, but decided otherwise, since he was certain she would find a way to go there. So it was better to let her go under his watch than to let her go on her own.

“Oh? You are not going to stop me?”

“If you want me to, I will. *Your Highness, please stay here because it's dangerous outside,*” recited Duke monotonously.

“Only the King, my father, can order me. We are going.”

Duke smiled wryly, thinking how Leti-like her answer was, and threw her the coat. Leti caught it easily and followed behind Duke's brisk pace without lagging behind with her long, elegant strides. They hurried outside, walking together, side by side.

“Have I ever told you I can ride a horse alone?”

During this time, ladies in their dresses were not supposed to ride horses astride nor alone. They usually rode horses side-saddled with gentlemen leading the horse. A lady of noble birth who could ride horses was considered strange for trying to accomplish an unnecessary skill for a lady. Leti simply learned how to ride one so she would not lose against her older brothers and knew it would be embarrassing for the whole kingdom if their ruler could not even ride a horse alone.

“You’re just a princess on the outside, right? I mean inside, you are exactly like Prince Friedhelm during our Academy days. Your incognito walks and the inconveniences you cause me. They are identical.”

“You know your master well.”

“If there’s anything different, you’re a good actress playing the princess you are truly not, making you the more troublesome one.”

“You really do know me well,” Leti said again, her voice laced with amusement, no trace of her being offended.

“Princess!? Where are you going at this hour?”

“To the North Cemetery. Also...”

Leti gave orders and instructions to her servants who came after her, and she told her guards that they may come if they wanted to. After she had said everything she needed to, she hastened outside.

Leti and Duke, accompanied with three of her guards, headed toward the North Cemetery. When they reached their destination, everyone in the party except for Leti was creeped out by their first experience of a cemetery at night.

“Senpai! By the West Forest... huh? Your Highness!?”

The only knight from the Order awaiting them was Astrid, who could not hide his surprise at seeing Leti outside in the middle of the night.

“Her Highness will help with the search... More importantly, why are *you* here, Astrid? Aren’t you off-duty tonight? Where’s Grantz?”

Duke’s partner for the search was his other colleague, Grantz, but he couldn’t be seen anywhere. Duke took a step forward, shielding Leti with his back.

“Grantz-senpai went with the others heading towards the West Forest. They have gathered information that someone saw the children go that way earlier today. So he asked me to stay here instead and relay the message to you. Will you also head to the forest?”

“Let me think...”

According to the report, the children went to the West Forest, but Duke did not know how reliable the source of information was. While he was weighing his options, whether he should go to the forest or stay in the cemetery, Leti came to a decision and started moving on her own.

“Duke, Astrid, could you try to move that stone away? I would like to check all possibilities I can think of before I go home.”

“Stone?”

Leti was pointing towards total darkness, and they could not see anything. They only knew that the door to the Royal Burial Chamber was somewhere around that direction. Leti held out the lamp and started walking there without even minding the dark. As the lamp lit up the area, everyone saw the stone she was referring to. It was round, and moving it would need some force.

“Even children can move this stone if they do it together.”

“Have you ever tried it?” asked Duke.

“Yes. I am *that Prince* Friedhelm’s younger sister, after all.”

Astrid, the youngest in the group, volunteered to try and move the stone, which was still damp and wet due to the rain last night. He placed both of his hands on it and pushed with all of his might. The stone rolled off easily, revealing a hole behind it.

“What the...?” Duke exclaimed.

Everyone, except for Leti was surprised to find a hole big enough for children to pass through.

“Just as I thought. This hole is connected to the Burial Chamber. I think that this was a hole naturally created due to weathering by the wind and rain. As far as I know, only the royal children know about its existence. The other children might have heard it from someone or found it on their own.”

Leti brought the lamp closer to the hole and examined it.

“A corner of the hole collapsed. I guess the stone rolled back on its own, covering the hole again and maybe trapping the children inside.”

Just as Leti said that, there was a trail on the ground of something sliding in.

“There are also small steps here, and these are yet to dry. Quick, we should confirm if my theory is true.”

“Can you even see it?” Duke asked curiously.

“Yes, I have confidence in my eyes.” *Or rather, confidence in the dark.* Leti could see things clearly even in the night, thanks to one of the Swords of Promise, the Sword of Black Darkness.

“We cannot go inside through this hole. We are going through the front.”

“The front...?” asked Astrid.

“Through the front door. The key has arrived anyway.”

And as if on cue, a white bearded old chamberlain on a horse approached them.

The instructions Leti gave to her servants before she left the castle was for them to fetch the key to the Royal Burial Chamber that was managed in the castle. With her complete preparedness, Duke saw Leti’s other brother, Guido, in her.

“Sorry for calling you this late.”

“Do not be Your Highness. I’m willing to stretch out these old muscles of mine for children the same age as my grandchildren. This is also the other item you have requested.”

Leti checked the small pouch the chamberlain delivered.

“Thank you. You have been very helpful. I shall return the key so you may go back to the castle and rest.”

“No, no, no, no. Taking care of the key is my job. I will wait here for your return.”

The old chamberlain opened the intricate lock and pulled off the chains wrapped around the antique door handle. Astrid and Leti’s guards pulled the doors open, revealing the stairs going down to the Royal Burial Chamber where the past kings of Sommevesle were laid to rest. Astrid took a look into the darkness where the stairs lead and found his knees shaking at the eeriness of the sight. No one would want to stay inside any longer than necessary, for the winds sounded like howls of voices in pain.

“I shall take the lead so we will not get lost. A small search party would be better. Duke, Astrid, come with me. The others should wait here in case the children find their way out on their own.”

Leti’s guards did not really want to leave her alone, but thought it would be fine since her knight, Duke, would be with her. Leti nodded as they told her to take care. The party proceeded down the stairs, Leti leading the way with a lamp in her hands.

“Watch your steps. The floor is slippery due to last night’s rain,” warned Leti. She was followed by Duke and Astrid.

No natural light could reach the underground chamber. The lamp’s flicker was only enough to lighten their steps. It was so dark that they could no longer see the end of their hands if they stretched it out.

“Your Highness, you are the most knowledgeable about this place, so please continue on taking the lead. Astrid, take the rear and be alert in case anything happens.”

“Roger!” said Astrid.

Duke strengthened his guard due to the current situation. In truth, he wanted to take the lead with Leti in between him and Astrid to secure her safety. But with his suspicions, he could not afford having Astrid near Leti.

Her Highness has already noticed the danger around Astrid. I’m sure she’s on her guard as well.’

Duke could only believe in whatever it was Leti possessed. He was prepared, on his guard with his hand on his sword, ready to draw it out anytime. In contrast to the tensed knight was his relaxed master, her voice normal and calm.

“This underground chamber is vast and complicated. I only remember the way inside here because I have been coming here

ever since I was a child, but anyone who would enter here for the first time would definitely get lost.”

Knight King Christian designed this place to be complicated and confusing to prevent the place of rest of the kings from being violated in any way. The path towards the chambers was never straight. There would be numerous turns to make, and drawing a mental map would be difficult. Even Leti did not have a clear map inside her head. It was more of a knowing because of the number of times she had been in the place.

“But in the end, this is just a grave. Getting there would not take much time once you know the way.”

“Ahhh... But this place creepy, isn’t it?” Astrid let out in a weak voice. The place was a grave, after all, and something might come out at any moment. Duke was also feeling uneasy being inside the deep, deep darkness, and thought he should have at least brought holy water with him.

“Uhm... have... have you ever encountered anyone not of the living in here, Your Highness?”

“Not of the living? Ghosts? I have not seen one ever, though I really wanted to meet one. I have a lot of questions to ask the Revolution King – like why he killed his master.”

Astrid shrieked and swallowed his breath.

“Se-se-senpai! What should we do if we meet one? Wouldn’t it be treason if we raised our swords against the kings of the past?”

“Worry first if a sword will work against them. We should’ve brought a priest with us. Your Highness, do you have any amulets or holy water we could use?”

“Do not talk to me at the moment. I am currently regretting bringing the two of you here. I should have just searched for the children alone.” Leti couldn’t help but be a bit disappointed at the stupid things the two fully grown knights were saying.

“If I were you, I would be more scared of the living. Which do you think is more frightening? A bloody assassin targeting your life, or a ghost of the past simply floating around? The living is a whole lot scarier.”

“Oh. If you put it that way...” Duke said, agreeing with her opinion just as Astrid butted in.

“I don’t think the bloody assassin can defeat me, so the ghost is still scarier.”

Duke decided to scold Astrid later and tell him that he should agree with the lady for those types of situation even if he had to lie, but Leti, on the other hand, was not even bothered by Astrid’s words.

Silence followed their exchange. Only the sound of their footsteps echoed in the darkness, and the lamp elongated their

shadows into creepy shapes. The two knights couldn't help but truly respect their Princess Leticia, who was fearlessly leading the way. After walking some distance, the group heard the sound of a human voice. Astrid shrieked and started to panic even before he could comprehend the situation.

“A-a-a-a voice! There's someone here!!!”

Astrid turned blue and Duke was shaking, already thinking of whether or not there really was a ghost. Leti, on the other hand, gave the two shivering knights a cold stare. The voice they heard was unlike the howls of the wind earlier upon entering the chamber. It was distinctly a human voice.

“...Are you two forgetting the reason why we came in here?”

“Eh? Why? Uhm... To save the children...” answered Astrid.

“Ah!”

Duke and Astrid looked at each other, the cause remembered, and started to work. Astrid ran first towards the direction of the voice, followed by Leti and Duke. Leti pointed the lamp towards their direction and told them help had come. Then a small shadow emerged from the dark and ran towards the search party. The child grabbed Leti's gown, crying and shaking. Leti knelt down and gently hushed the child to calm down.

“Are you alone?”

The child sobbingly answered *yeah* to Leti's question. Duke then urged everyone to hurry outside when Leti told him to wait and passed the lamp to him.

Leti took out the small pouch the old chamberlain delivered to her. The pouch contained a water bottle and some biscuits Leti asked to be prepared for the children.

“Have some water to calm you down.”

Leti gave the child the water bottle, and he gulped everything down. Leti followed up a biscuit to his mouth before he could even ask for it. Leti stood up again and took the lamp from Duke.

“You're surprisingly kind to children...”

“And to women too. Even I share the chivalric spirit of knights.”

The party started to walk again towards the exit. Leti, with the lamp in hand, once again took the lead, followed by Duke with the child in hand, and then Astrid. On their way back, Leti asked the child how he ended up inside, and the story he told confirmed their theory. The child was able to move the stone and then he found the hole and went through it. However, the stone slipped back on its own, trapping him inside, so he searched for a different way out and ended up getting lost in the complicated labyrinth. They continued to walk on towards the exit, and when they saw the door, everyone felt relieved at they could finally get out of the creepy chamber.

“Duke, I will light up the steps, so carry the child and go up to the door. The steps are wet and too steep for a child,” ordered Leti.

Duke did as his master said and went up the stairs carrying the child. Astrid was looking at them from behind, keeping guard at the back when his gaze focused on Leti’s defenseless back and the *voice* once again spoke to him.

“Her back is wide open! Go and kill her! NOW!”

Astrid felt something crawl inside his head. He unconsciously covered his mouth and gritted his teeth to stop any sound from coming out. He also did not realize that he took out the knife he normally hid under his sleeves. Inside his head, a gruesome scene played. He sliced Leti’s white neck with the knife, her blood gushing out from the wound he had just delivered. The blood dyed her elegant dress into a beautiful shade of scarlet. After seeing her writhe in pain, he took out his sword and pierced it into Leti’s stomach, keeping her down on the floor, agonizing in pain as he left the sword inside her. Astrid’s head throbbed in pain as he fought against that scene in his mind, and kept on telling himself that he did not want to do such a horrible thing to Leti.

Then the voice spoke again to him, “Hurry! Fulfill your desire! Your desire to kill the Knight King!”

Astrid shook his head to drive the voice away.

I would never do that. She is the next queen, the master Duke-senpai swore his loyalty to. She is a very kind person and I would never want to kill her.'

Leti, wholly ignorant about the turmoil happening inside Astrid's head, was telling Duke that she was coming up next when they heard something crack. The next moment, Leti found herself thrown out of balance, and Duke instinctively reached out his hand towards Leti. Astrid moved before he could even say look out.

"Your Highness! Astrid!" Duke shouted as Leti and Astrid floated through space and hit the ground. They were both shocked with the sensation of falling down, like their stomachs had flipped. Pain followed upon hitting the ground, with debris falling after them.

Drops of water falling down on Leti's head woke her up. Small rocks rolled down her dress as she stood up.

"Ouch..."

Fortunately, Leti had the Sword of Iron Steel – the sword of protection against physical attacks – so she did not have any wounds or broken bones.

"Now I see why I cannot give this sword away," Leti whispered as she dusted off her coat.

“The floor collapsed and it will be impossible for us to climb back up.”

This accident was already bound to happen based on how the floor cracked. Weathering due to natural forces had already taken its toll on the old structure. It had not been a problem before, since no one normally came in the area, but due to tonight’s incident, the floor suddenly had to support the weight of three fully grown adults. Gladly, there was no need to worry much since Duke was outside and he saw exactly what happened. He was probably already organizing a rescue party for them.

“Astrid, are you alive?”

“Aw-aw-aw-aw...Your Highness!?”

Leti heard Astrid’s answer somewhere near her. He quickly stood up when he heard Leti’s call and looked around, trying to remember what happened to them. He then realized everything when he saw the hole above them. The voice vanished probably because of the shock he received due to the fall.

I will not do such a thing. As long as I keep my head clear, I will not fall and give in to the assassin in me. Astrid reiterated again in his mind his resistance against what the voice was telling him. He dusted himself off and straightened.

“Astrid, you do have a knife with you, do you not? Could you lend it to me for a while?”

“Eh...?”

“I broke my nail and I would like to fix it before it gets any worse. I only have a spoon with me.”

A confused Astrid handed to Leti his knife, wondering how she knew about it. Leti carefully took the knife and slowly trimmed her ring finger.

“Rest assured, I will not tell anyone about it.”

“Uhhmm...” Astrid took a step back, not knowing what to do now that he had been found out.

“Your abilities were not due to a talent for swords. What you have is an ability for killing. My eyes are very discerning.”

“Eh... ah... ah... I-I see.” Astrid was relieved to know that what Leti referred to was his past and not the murderous thoughts he was having about her recently. But he soon realized he had to deny it.

“No, Your Highness, I am not. Really, I am not.”

“If you insist, then you are not. Though I have a question for you, out of curiosity. Why did you want to be a knight? I am certain you could have taken over your family trade.”

Leti obviously did not believe Astrid’s denial and continued on.

“You are supposed to be a commoner of Sommevesle, are you not? But your obviously learned manner of speaking is giving you

away. You should try and adapt more of the downtown accents. Better be more careful in the future.”

Leti casually threw back the knife to Astrid, and she clearly saw with her *eyes* how he caught it easily despite the darkness.

“I also think you are a bit too flashy for someone in an undercover mission.”

“No... I am not. I just simply wanted to be a knight.”

“And that is the mysterious part for me. Why would someone like you, born and bred to be a part of that trade, want to be a knight?”

Leti continued on with her interrogation, completely ignoring Astrid’s denial. Astrid saw how much Leti knew. He decided to give up the pretense and honestly answer her questions.

“...The most important point for an assassin was for no one to suspect that you are one. So in order to do that, we undergo training and education to be able to disguise ourselves. It was during one of those classes that I came across a picture book about the story of a gallant knight. Ever since then, I dreamt of living in such a world where power is used to protect and not to kill.”

Leti knew that the knight world was not that clean and ideal. And she was sure Astrid knew about it as well, but despite that, he still looked up to that ideal knight.

“Your Highness, have you ever longed for a fairytale’s world because it was something completely different from what you know? I sure did. I longed about it because I knew it was impossible... I truly wanted to be the Astrid I wished I could be, so I left my home and family.”

Astrid tried before to tell the other assassins about his dream of becoming a knight. However, they laughed at him and mockingly told him to give it a try. Hearing that particular sarcastic remark made Astrid realize that it was exactly what he should do, to give it a try, so left his organization as the first step in fulfilling his dream.

Leti acknowledged Astrid’s resolution to make his dream come true. “I understand that feeling.”

“But I am always worried. Worried whether I am smiling correctly or talking properly. I underwent training on how to smile, but I was not really sure whether my smile was how it should look like,” Astrid said with his usual refreshing smile on his face.

Seeing Astrid’s expression, Leti realized that Astrid only had one smile. It was likely because he did not know that there were other kinds of smiles, like a smile hiding sadness, a smile with a tinge of hurt, or a smile that had accepted everything that fate might throw at them.

“Everything about me, my smile, my words, my personality. All of these were created for people to like me... I was not sure whether someone like me had the right to live in this world.”

“The Knight Academy’s course is for two years, correct? That means you are only on your second year of quitting being an assassin. So what are complaining of, youngster?”

Leti, only a year older than Astrid, called him a youngster. If Duke was there, he would have probably blurted out, “Aren’t you as well?”

“I have been called the perfect princess, though that title has recently been degraded to Leftover Princess. Anyway, that title of being a perfect princess was not given to me when I was born. It was something I earned for trying and being one for the past seventeen years. My smiles and my words are all created to be liked by everyone.”

“Is... that so?”

“Yes. Tell me Astrid, do you like Duke?”

“Yes! Duke-senpai is strong and everyone relies on him. He’s amazing!”

“Have you ever felt happy when you are with him?”

“Yes. Just recently, he praised me for good work done and...”

Astrid continued on telling stories of what he did with Duke and the other knights. He probably did not notice, but his expression was different than his usual smile. He looked kind of embarrassed, but still happy, an expression befitting his age.

“Let me ask you one last thing. Do you know anything about the Ghost Energy?”

“Ghost Energy? I’m sorry, I know nothing of it.”

“Do not mind it. I am sorry asking such a strange question.”

‘He does not seem to be lying. Besides, if he really was the host, I am certain he would not have let this perfect chance go to waste. Maybe it is safe to say that he is not the host.’

Her suspicions against Astrid were not yet completely cleared, but there was also the possibility that he was a just a former assassin. The conversation Leti had with Astrid made her think it might be safe for now to trust him and watch him grow. He was doing his best to be his ideal self, and he was currently on his way in making the necessary connections needed to achieve his goal in the Royal Chivalric Order.

“Remember that feeling you have now and never forget that. Try imitating me and what I have done these past seventeen years. Some are still for show, but some had already found their way in me making them a part of who I truly am,” Leti advised.

“Seventeen years...” Astrid looked at Leti with respect, and that respect was already turning into adoration.

“Looks like our rescue has come.”

Small stones started to fall from above and they could hear noisy activity going on outside.

“Your Highness! Astrid!” shouted Duke.

“We are fine! No need to worry!” Leti answered back.

The hustle coming from above suggested there were more people present. Duke might have returned to the castle first to organize a rescue party for them. A rope ladder came down next, and Leti climbed up first.

“...So Her Highness is a senpai doing it for seventeen years, huh...”

Astrid thought maybe he should just try and do what Leti advised him – to just do what he could and be patient. There was no need to rush. Sure, he might still get caught up in the darkness inside him, but someday, just like Her Highness, doing it for seventeen years, and just like his knight-senpai whom he admired, he would reach his goal and be the person he wanted to be.

“Do you want power?” A voice asked.

“Power?”

“Yes, power. Power to be the person you aspire to be.”

“...To be the person I aspire to be...a knight like senpai...”

Astrid’s senpai was a Knight of the Sixth Rank in the Royal Chivalric Order—Duke Barchet. He was desired to become the knight of a wonderful master, Princess Leticia, and Duke himself

wished to be Leti's knight. Duke was exactly like the knight in the picture book he read when he was a child.

"Yeah... I wanna be like him... I want to have that power."

"Then allow me to grant you that power. The contract has been sealed."

No matter how much urging the *voice* did to make Astrid kill Leti, it did not work. But when he was asked whether he wanted power to become his ideal knight, he showed a chink in his armor – he showed the desire to have power. Honest and straight people like him were weak against intricate deceptions, and the voice did not let this opportunity pass. It had finally succeeded.

Astrid's body started shaking, shuddering. Something was slowly crawling inside him, taking control over his body. His nails clawed on the wall, screeching as it moved, but the sound was nothing compared to the storm raging inside him.

"I shall become one with your body and will grant you the power you wished for... in exchange for your life!"

Astrid opened his eyes, confused, not only what was happening to him, but also about the unknown memories that were filling his head. These memories belonged to the Ghost Energy, the true identity of the voice inside him.



“No! I did not wish for this power. I don’t need your power! I only wanted to be a... true knight... with my own... strength...”

Astrid’s consciousness cut off, and he was forced into a heavy slumber, like he was slowly sinking down to the bottom of a murky swamp. The stiletto turned paper knife that Astrid did not even know he was carrying slowly entered into his body and set his insides burning.

“Astrid, you may come up next!” shouted Leti in her beautiful voice, echoing inside the pit where Astrid was left alone. He silently climbed up the ladder, and Duke welcomed him, worriedly asking whether or not he was okay.

“...Yes. I am fine.”

The lamp’s light set Astrid’s body aglow, and that sight was reflected in Duke’s eyes. However, a different person was reflected in Astrid’s piercing emerald eyes.

“Oi, Astrid!”

“A steaming hot shower will be refreshing, won’t it, senpai?” Astrid said in his normal cheerful voice, but Duke was not at all convinced and knew he should not let his guard down against Astrid.

“Astrid, stay here. I’m certain the children will no longer dare come back, but still stay for a while, just in case something comes

up. I will send additional members once I get back to camp,” ordered Duke.

Duke was aware that Astrid was off-duty, but he did not want Astrid anywhere near Leti, so he gave that unreasonable order. Astrid nodded in acknowledgment and sent them off, watching them as they headed back to the Castle, leaving him all alone.

“I... I have finally taken over this body! This is truly wonderful! The best body compared to any other bodies I have taken in the past! Burning his life force is such a waste!”

There was no one left to witness Astrid laughing like a lunatic in the middle of the cemetery.

“Your Highness, did anything happen down there with Astrid?” Duke asked as soon as Leti got off the horse in the Royal Stable.

“A conversation. Besides, I do not think Astrid is someone who would do this and that to a lady.”

“Not that. I know you know what I mean. Astrid is...” *planning to kill you*, finished Duke in his mind and conveyed it to his master with his eyes. He knew Leti’s life was in danger, but he did not have any proof, so the most he could do was to warn her and remind her to be careful.

“Anyway, I’ll escort you until your room. And if anything happens again, call me.”

Leti’s villa was filled with maids and servants. If anything happened, there would be an immediate witness. They were on guard all throughout their walk back to the villa, but in the end it was not at all needed, and they reached Leti’s room.

“I’m sorry for disturbing you today. Leave the rest to me. I’ll report to you tomorrow, or rather later. Tomorrow is already coming.”

Hearing Duke say “tomorrow is already coming” made Leti remember a conversation she was having with a certain king before all of this commotion happened.

—“I’ll wake up and face tomorrow. Then I’ll be killed.”

‘Tomorrow is already coming,’ Leti mused. Her time and the Lion King’s time were different. For Leti, it was supposed to be a thing of the past, a part of history, but it felt to her like it was only going to happen when the morrow came.

“Duke, stand right there,” ordered Leti and then she blew off the candle’s fire.

“Oi!” Duke was about to turn around and ask her what she was doing when Leti scolded him to stand still.

“Tomorrow is coming.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Have you ever, in your life, wished for it not to come?”

“Maybe.”

Then Duke felt something land on his back with a soft thud. Judging from the height and feeling, it was probably Leti’s head.

“...You will never betray me, won’t you?”

The Revolution King was King Alexander’s cousin, best friend and trusted knight. He was the only person who lived after going against the Lion King’s opinion. That showed how much he was trusted, and yet he still betrayed his own master and killed him.

“...You know what, I can’t do it even if you ask me to,” replied Duke.

Leti softly whispered, “I see.”

There was no better answer than the one Duke gave her. Leti thought King Alexander might have had these kind of moments with his knight, and he would never know why he lost it; Leti, too, had no means of knowing.

“Thank you. Good night,” Leti said and her knight took his leave.

Leti would probably no longer drift to the Knight King’s Space tonight. She would simply have a normal dream and hope that the Lion King would fulfill his promise.

“The child did not have any wounds and is completely fine. He was already scolded by his parents, so the Order no longer added to it. As for the West Forest...”

The next day, Duke came back to Leti, reporting what happened afterwards. He was relieved to see she was already back to the princess he knew she was and not the young lady who showed weakness last night.

“Lastly, for the Royal Burial Chamber, we have talked with the Chamberlain regarding the hole and the collapsed stairs. The Order shall take shifts in guarding the place until everything has been repaired. That’s all for the report.”

“Thank you for your work. Take this with you.”

Leti took some papers on the table and gave it to Duke.

“What’s this?”

“A list of candidates for my Knights of the Round. They are persons worthy to be taken note of. They range from being commoners in the Order to high ranked stupid and brainless nobles.”

“What is worthy in taking note of someone who’s stupid and brainless?”

“I did say *high* ranked. They are more useful than *low* ranked fools.”

“Oh. I see.”

Duke looked at the paper and scanned the list.

“I already have the background check of the top ten candidates. The reports are attached there. They will be your future subordinates, so you’d better take a look at those.”

“I understand.”

Duke finished looking at the list and was about to read the background check when the first name he saw was very familiar, and he unconsciously addressed Leti with a simple, “Oi.”

“I remember telling you that the only person allowed to address me that way is my husband. Do you have any questions about the list?”

“Astrid’s name is in here.”

“Astrid Gale is one of the best candidates skill-wise. The rest is up to you.”

Leti first thought that having Astrid as a knight was troublesome, but her opinion was starting to change. Astrid’s desire to be a knight was strong. Maybe she could look over his dark past and see where his future would go. If left free, Astrid would probably end up in either Seventh Heaven or Valkyrie. For

Leti, it would be better if he would choose Seventh Heaven, because Friedhelm could accept him for who he was, including his past.

“That is all for now. And one last thing. Do not forget the evening ball hosted by Lauenstein ten days from now. You will be coming as my knight, so remember to come in your formal uniform.”

“Roger that... Though I feel that it'd be more of a marriage meeting under the pretense of being escorted by Prince Friedhelm.”

“I agree. He has been preparing for this and has been annoying me ever since. We shall take our leave as soon as I can think of a good excuse, so make sure to do whatever it is you need to do and strike conversation with any lady you fancy early in the night. You are currently not in a relationship with anyone, are you not? I suggest you find your partner now, for we shall be very busy in the near future.”

Duke wanted to answer back with, “Are you my mother?” but restrained himself and simply said that he did not have one for now and took his leave to go back to the camp.

“Good morning senpai! Last night was terrible, right?” cheerfully greeted Astrid when he saw Duke approaching the Camp.

Duke, fully alert to Astrid's presence, greeted him back and told him to do his best for the day. As he passed by Astrid, his junior slipped something in his hand. He gave Astrid a questioning look, but Astrid simply looked back, as if he did not do anything.

After walking a few steps, Duke looked around to check if there was anyone nearby and straightened the small piece of paper Astrid gave him.

“A message? — ‘Please don't throw this away.’ What does that mean?”

Duke checked the paper if there was anything else on it but he found nothing. Astrid acted like he didn't know anything about it, so Duke could only guess at the meaning behind the paper.

The next day, the same thing happened in the morning, and then again at night. Now that he had received three pieces of paper, he finally understood what they were for. Each piece was part of a letter.

Please don't throw this away.

I have a favor to ask.

Please protect Her Highness. I will...

Duke could not comprehend why Astrid was doing this. He could have just directly relayed his message or wrote a normal

letter instead of piecing it out. And every time Astrid gave Duke the letter, he always played innocent about it. Duke was completely lost at where, exactly, this was heading – until he received the fourth piece of paper.

“Please don’t throw this away. I have a favor to ask. Please protect Her Highness. I will...” Duke recited from memory, as he had read the messages a thousand times trying to decipher it. And the purpose of the letter was unveiled with the fourth paper.

...tell you how you can kill me.

Duke was a noble, but he had always worn the knight’s formal uniform whenever he attended balls and gatherings as a knight. The formal wear of a Knight of the Royal Chivalric Order consisted of their black uniform, white gloves embroidered with the Order’s emblem, and a cloak showing the knight’s rank, which for Duke was of the Sixth Rank.

Leti said before that Duke was a little different from her tastes, but the way his handsome face complimented his dignified look in his formal wear would make her admit that he could make ladies gather around him. However, his eyes were a bit – no, they were rather sharp and intimidating, and ladies with faint hearts would dare not to go near him.

“Oh, Duke! Dressed up, aren’t we?”

“Work. It’s work. I’ll be attending a ball as Her Highness’s guard for the ball at Marquis Lauenstein’s mansion.”

He was leaving the camp’s quarters when he passed by Astrid. Astrid was surprised to see his senior in his formal wear.

“Senpai! You really look like a gentleman! Are you going to a ball with Princess Leticia?” Astrid asked Duke with his usual smile, but it did not reach his eyes – his eyes that looked like that of a predator waiting for the perfect chance to catch his prey.

“Yeah, I am. Could you relay a message for me? Tell him to relax and don’t worry.”

“To whom shall I...”

“To whom it may be indeed. See you later, Astrid,” Duke said, with Astrid sending him off with a freezing glare.

Leti was never one to be swayed by other people’s moods and usually ignored them. But since the person sitting across her in the carriage was her knight, she felt she should at least inquire about him.

“...Is there anything wrong?”

“Nothing,” was her knight’s reply, despite the fact it was written all over Duke’s face that he was in a foul mood. Leti

decided to let the matter go and not press him about it, at least saving her and him from a debate from happening.

The two of them kept their silence until they reached Lauenstein Mansion. Duke finally broke the silence as he assisted Leti in going down the carriage.

“Stay with Prince Friedhelm as much as possible.”

“A true blue member of Prince Friedhelm’s faction, aren’t we? Did he tell you anything?”

There was no need for Leti to stick with Friedhelm, for it was he who would be the one coming to her and introducing her to countless gentlemen he thought were worthy to be her husband, pestering her for opinions regarding them.

At first, Leti thought of going home as soon as she greeted all the necessary people, but as she looked at the gloomy night sky reflecting her mood, she thought she might have to stay longer than necessary.

“Welcome, Princess Leticia. I am honored you have accepted my invitation. Now, I’m sure my wife here would be more than grateful to make her special berry pie for you if you would come and visit us more often, just like how you usually came to play here when you were a child,” greeted the current Marquis Lauenstein. After greeting him, Leti proceeded on to greet his wife, then their

son, and then the other members of the host family and then... and then... and then finally done just right in time before Leti's throat completely dried up. Now that Leti was taking a break from greeting people, Duke, who was watching Leti's interaction with the guests from afar, approached her.

"Your Highness, I would like to leave my post for a moment. An acquaintance is in attendance and..."

"You may go and do as you please. I give you my permission."

Duke, though a knight for this night's party, was still an heir of a baron, and Leti was sure he had his own share of greetings to do.

"Thank you. Please stay by Prince Friedhelm's side during my absence."

"He will. I need not come to him; he shall be the one to come to me no matter how much I avoid him."

"True enough," Duke wryly agreed and addressed Leti once again before he leave.

"Your Highness, I shall give you my answer here. I will not hesitate to clear any danger lurking around my master... even if the said danger is my adorable junior."

"Duke?"

"A Knight's vow to thee..." With that, he left.

Leti had asked Duke before if he was truly prepared to be her knight, and he gave her the best answer, but she did not feel joy. What she felt was worry and concern that something was wrong and that she had to stop Duke from going wherever he was headed to.

“Your Highness, how do you do? I hope you are enjoying the night. Your headdress suits you perfectly,” complimented a young lady.

“...Ah... thank you.” The appearance of another conversation partner prevented Leti from calling out to Duke. She searched for him with her eyes and saw him tip his head to her before he vanished into the crowd.

‘I shall catch him later and ask for an explanation.’

But Duke never came back after that.

Leti chatted idly with the other guests, elegantly holding a goblet in her hand and casually looking around, calculating the best escape route. She had already spent enough time not to be rude wanted to search for Duke already.

“Behind that door is a rose garden full of untamed thorny rose bushes. It’s gonna be painful.”

“Would you please stop reading other people’s minds, Prince Friedhelm?”

Leti had distanced herself from Friedhelm all night, but he had finally caught her. Leti put her goblet down on a tray held by a servant and accepted that her fate was in Friedhelm's hands.

“Hey, have you seen Astrid? I wanted to introduce him to Seventh Heaven tonight.”

“No, I have not.”

“I guess my invitation was too weak. I should have given him a proper one.”

Leti took a side step to the left, but just as expected of her brother, he already knew what she was up to and casually grabbed her sleeve, unnoticed by anyone, and dragged her back to the party.

“How 'bout that gentleman wearing the blue coat? The one to your right.”

“...He seems picky, and that is a too-good reminder of Prince Guido, so no.”

“Aren't you picky too?”

“Do not group me with that sweets-hating-man.”

Leti's words made Friedhelm remember that Guido's villa had banned all types of sweets inside, and he shivered at the cold thought. He shrugged off that horrible idea and continued on marketing his husband candidates to Leti.

“Then how about that man with the golden cuffs? The one with red lining on his coat. He’s the oldest son of Earl Eckerd.”

“A capable person... but do you expect me to marry a person two decades older than me? I might mistakenly call him father.”

“Your complaints are endless. Well, tell me, who’d be good enough for you?”

Leti replied with her usual answer, “the looks of Lion King Alexander, the abilities of Administrative King Karlheinz and the personality of One-armed King Oswald.”

“In what novel did that King Oswald come from? I already tried searching, but I haven’t come across him yet.”

“You may come across him in the near future. He is a gloomy person, but he is capable of finishing things once he decides to do it. Now, if you could please excuse me.”

Leti ended their conversation there and tried to escape, but he already knew her plan, so he grabbed her and brought her to the dance floor. He then signaled Seventh Heaven to bring in gentlemen that could be Leti’s partner.

“It is an honor to dance with you, my future queen.” Friedhelm bowed and took Leti’s hand for a dance.

“Give me a clumsy lead and I shall step on your foot without any hesitation,” threatened Leti.

The crowd cleared the floor for the waltz of the First Prince and his sister, the Crowned Princess. Leti showed them the perfect dance befitting her crown – her feet were silent in their steps, and her form was graceful and elegant.

“You know what? We should show the world that we are actually in good terms sometimes.”

“Really? I thought the world has already given up and dubbed our relationship cold.”

“A steamy, hot relationship is impossible, but we can always have a warm, fluffy one, right?”

They quietly conversed throughout the dance, and Leti, just as expected of the perfect princess, had her princess smile on her face the whole time.

“Rain...?”

A different sound mixed in with the music of the waltz. The sound of water drops and the scent of rain filled the room, but the musicians played harder and louder, keeping the music alive and drowning out the sound of the rain.

The roses in the garden bent their stem, the flowers heavy with rain water, but not Duke. He kept standing on guard outside in the garden, waiting for someone, even after it had started to rain

heavily. He took off his wet gloves and threw them away, but they did not land on the rose bushes where they should have.

“You finally came.”

The gloves did not fall on the bushes because they hit a man. Duke’s hand was already resting on his sword, ready for whatever might come.

“...Senpai? Is there anything wrong? You’d catch a cold out here. Prince Friedhelm invited me so I came to greet him and...”

“Quit your lies.”

Duke did not want to fool around, so he cut Astrid’s obvious lie and asked him directly, “Astrid, who am I?”

“The Knight of the First Seat of the future queen’s Knights of the Round... or so I heard.”

“Yes, I am Her Highness’s knight and I am most sensitive to the murderous intents directed at my master.”

The sun had already set and it was difficult to see in the dark. The strong rain made it harder to see, and Duke depended only to the faint light coming from the mansion. But despite all of this, Astrid kept his smile.

“Who are you? You are not the Astrid who gave me that letter. So who are you?”

“Letter?”

“A letter he probably wrote by taking back his body for a few moments to write and give it to me. A letter that said I should protect my master from himself, from you.”

“*Hahaha!* That explains those few moments I lost consciousness! This boy was doing that! What a heroic deed! But futile! He was asking for the impossible! *Hahaha!*”

This did not provoke Duke and he simply kept his cool. The real Astrid, his junior and not the murderous Astrid in front of him, taught Duke a way to defeat him. Included in that action was his junior’s wish—for him to be able to stop whatever the other Astrid was planning to do.

“Don’t worry, Astrid. I will make it happen. I will stop you.” Duke took out his sword and charged at him.

“Let’s do this Astrid! A fight till death!”

Astrid took out his sword as well and their swords clashed, and fought against each other, deciding who would live.

The music of the waltz and the pouring sound of the rain isolated the ongoing battle in the rose garden. No one heard the metallic clangs of the clashing swords, nor did anyone see the two knights fighting for their lives.

“You brutal!” groaned Astrid.

Astrid's body was still that of a growing adolescent. It lacked the defined muscles that provided the older Duke his strength. Duke's thrusts and charges at him left his body shaking. But that lack of strength was countered by his agility and speed he had acquired through his training ever since he was a child.

Frontal attacks won't work on him!' thought Duke. He may have more strength, but Astrid, though barely, still had the upper hand in the battle with his experience. If the battle was drawn out, Duke would definitely lose once his stamina started waning. He had to finish this battle before that, for if not, death was the only fate awaiting him. Gladly, Astrid himself told Duke about his weakness.

My weak point is reacting too much.

Try and throw a small stone at me at a close distance and I will always try to evade it, making an opening for myself in the process.

Duke decided that it was about time to do that. He feinted that he could no longer hold off all of Astrid's attacks. Then he removed his left hand from his sword and slid out the coin he hid in his sleeves. Once the coin was in position, he flipped it towards Astrid.

Getting hit by a coin was not painful, and there was no particular need to avoid it, but Astrid's body moved instinctively,

creating an opening in his stance. Duke would not let this perfect opportunity get wasted.

Duke's body moved all on instinct. His heart was yet to follow on what he was about to do, but he knew he had to.

'...Do it, Duke! Don't hesitate!' Duke told himself. He held his sword tightly with both hands, raised it up and slashed down Astrid's body from his shoulders across his torso. The move was enough to make a mortal wound and cause Astrid to lose blood... or so it should have.

"What the...?!"

Duke felt like he was slicing through a boulder. Astrid's uniform was clearly cut, and blood was dripping down, but the wound was supposed to be deeper and blood should be gushing out.

"I see it does not work as well as the Knight King's Sword of Iron Steel."

Astrid touched the wood and looked at his fingers, dyed red with blood. Duke's attack should have been fatal, but no, it was nothing but a shallow cut.

"Have you finally realized your foolishness?"

And the rain grew even stronger.

Friedhelm let his guard down after seeing Leti dance with three gentlemen, and his sister saw this as the perfect opportunity to run away and escape the ballroom. She went directly out to the corridor and headed towards the door leading to the rose garden, walking as quietly as possible while gazing at the rain pouring outside.

“Marriage... I guess he does not understand that *that* is my last trump card.”

Ever since Leti accepted her fate of becoming the queen, she had already given up on marrying for love and prepared herself to marry for the country’s sake. She could use it as a peace offering should there be a war, or for negotiations, or to calm down any internal conflicts.

‘How can you expect me to waste that?’ Leti thought indignantly.

“Your Highness, there are still a lot of dashing men hoping to dance with you tonight.”

“Making a lady dance the whole time is not a good thing. Your thoughtfulness for ladies is not enough, Prince Friedhelm.”

“I know you’re not someone who’d get tired with that.”

Leti sighed. “You came to search for me, did you not? I shall only dance three more dances and that is the end of it. If not, I shall go home right at this instant faking an illness.”

“Three? Why not make it five?”

“I want to end this before my feet hurt. It takes much effort to dance gracefully.”

Three more dances and that was it. Leti made Friedhelm accept that condition, and they were about to go back inside when they heard noises in the Rose Garden. They rushed out to check when something fell on a puddle, splashing water on Leti’s dress.

‘What the... Duke!?’

Duke Barchet, Leti’s knight, lay unconscious on the stone floor. Friedhelm, utterly shocked at what he saw, willed himself to check on his friend and prevented his sister from coming near her knight. He knelt down to check on Duke, but even before he could fully examine him, he saw something shiny and smelling of steel flowing out from Duke’s body. He touched it and knew at once that the liquid was not rain but Duke’s blood.

“Go inside! Don’t stray too far away... from... me...”

Friedhelm fell on top of Duke’s body and lay unconscious as well.

“Onii-sama!”

Someone was definitely inside the mansion. Leti looked around for the attacker. Leti thought that as the crowned princess, she should run back inside and warn everyone to runaway. Both Duke and her brother were strong and wouldn’t die that easily. She

convinced herself that it was the right thing to do and turned around to go inside when she felt a strong murderous aura upfront.

“We meet again, Knight King!”

In front of Leti stood a man drenched in rain with a bloody sword in hand. He was someone she knew well. He was Duke’s junior, the genius rookie of the Royal Chivalric Order, and a former assassin.

“Astrid?”

“Surprised? *Ahababa!* I have wanted to see that face on you for a lo---ng time.” Astrid laughed like he was mad.

But Leti did not even flinch. Rather, she kicked off her heeled shoes so she could move more freely on bare feet.

“Were you the one who attacked Duke and my brother?”

“Duke? ...Ah, you mean that foolish man? He held out for a while, but there was no way he could win against my body.”

“...Ghost Energy. Was Astrid your host?”

“Yes! I had finally found you and should have killed you earlier, but this boy kept on resisting me. It took a lot of pain to take over this body. But ‘tis of no consequence, for the things I can do with this capable body are limitless!”

Leti clenched her teeth, regretting her oversight. True, Astrid “did not know” about the Ghost Energy, but that did equate to “not being the host.”

“Your weapon is not a paper knife today, is it? Is the real one scared and hiding somewhere?” Leti provoked the enemy as she veiled the turmoil broiling inside her.

“You’re wrong! This body is now mine. This boy is me. When I attacked you with the slave, we were still not yet completely assimilated, but it is different now! I can fully utilize my powers!”

The Ghost Energy’s powers and Astrid’s abilities made an invincible enemy. Leti knew that more than anyone, but she did not cower and focused her energy to her right hand.

“Come! Knight Sword!”

Leti’s palm grew hot and light gathered around it. The Knight Sword was the same sword wielded by the Knight King, and it would answer her call wherever and whenever she needed it. She was preparing to charge at Astrid, but Astrid had made the first move and was already charging towards her. The most Leti could do was to defend herself from his ceaseless attacks.

“Useless, useless, useless! I will cut your throat even before you can call any of your Swords of Promise!”

Astrid’s attacks were so relentless that Leti could not even have a moment to think. She tried distancing herself, but Astrid

would always be right at her neck without even ceasing his attacks. Astrid, now one with the Ghost Energy, was even smiling, probably because he found the situation interesting – the Knight King losing while he was not even giving everything he had.

“To not have a knight with a Sword of Promise worked against you, Knight King! How much have you fallen?!”

Leti’s breath was going shallow and rapid due to the Ghost Energy’s merciless attacks. She knew her feet were reaching their limit but she could not back down. She stood her ground, raised her sword, and attacked.

“This era is different from the time of King Alexander and King Karlheinz! There is no need for such power!”

The sword fight continued. Astrid’s sword grazed Leti’s left shoulder, but she was not bothered.

“What this time needs is trust! Too much power would just cause war and chaos!” Leti, standing firmly on the stone floor, again wielded the Knight Sword like it was nothing, for the sword was a part of her – it was simply like lifting her arms, effortless and light.

“I had my share of doubts and insecurities. I could have easily surpassed my brothers with this power. But I chose not to and *that* is the only wise decision I have made my entire life!”

Both of Leti's brothers were excellent in their own ways. It was because of their greatness that the problem of who would succeed the throne came up. Leti knew, and still thought that her brothers, Friedhelm and Guido, were worthy of the crown. If she revealed her identity as the Knight King's reincarnation, the people would have easily accepted her as the heir. But she did not want to do it. It was wrong.

"I am fine being the Leftover Princess! I shall make it as the best praise in the kingdom! And even the title Leftover Knight that Duke was gaining lately!

Astrid! If you are a bit of the knight you wish you were, fight against that power!"

Lack of exercise and practice had finally taken its toll on Leti. Her chest was painful and she was already having hard time breathing. She regretted not training her body before. But she could not give up. She acted like her body was already giving in and knelt down with one of her hands on the floor. Astrid charged at her, and she threw mud at his eyes at the perfect timing. On that moment, Leti called one of the Swords of Promise.

"Lightning! Come forth!"

Lightning cut through the dark rain clouds and hit Astrid. The direct lightning strike and the deafening sound of thunder paralyzed Astrid's body, and he lay motionless on the floor. Leti pointed the tip of her sword at Astrid's neck.

“What? Are you going to kill this boy, Knight King?”

“No. I cannot. He is an important junior to my knight. Duke will be saddened if I do.”

“Then let me go. I shall finish you in an instant.”

“I cannot do that as well.”

There was no known way of saving a person taken over by the Ghost Energy. Knight King Christian fought with these countless of times during the war and he had chosen every time to end the host’s life. Lion King Alexander and Administrative King Karlheinz followed suit. But Leti...

“I shall make a miracle happen! I believe in Astrid’s pure heart and his desire to be a knight that was so strong he willingly threw away everything.”

Leti grabbed Astrid’s shoulder with all her might and told the Ghost Energy not to underestimate Astrid’s admiration, his wish to be a knight, and the new bonds he had created with his colleagues in the Order. Astrid was brought up to be an assassin. But then he met a persona that was his complete opposite.

“—In the name of the Knight King, I shall knight you.”

The Ghost Energy asked with his eyes what Leti was planning to do. And he needed not wait for the answer.

“With a sword on thy right and a shield on thy left, dost thou swear loyalty to me till the day thou die?”

Leti hoped fervently for Astrid’s answer. She held his shoulders tighter, willing the true Astrid inside to answer her call.

“...Ah...” Astrid’s eyes faltered and Leti saw it as another opportunity. She repeated the Knight’s Oath once again. Astrid’s body started struggling, fighting himself.

“Wake up, Astrid Gale! Were you not going to be your ideal knight!? Wake up!”

And as if in answer to Leti’s reprimand, Astrid opened his lips, free from the Ghost Energy’s control, and mouthed, “I swear.” The words Astrid silently uttered were not the formal answer to the Oath, but it still meant his promise of loyalty, and that was enough. Leti closed her eyes, removed her hands from his shoulders and forcefully pressed her palm on his chest.

“Thou art my knight!” *I grant you the Sword of White Light to prevent the darkness from swallowing you.*

Leti’s eccentric history teacher told her that the Swords of Promise might have been a work of fiction for not even one sword remained, unlike that of the Knight Sword. But the truth about them was only known by the reincarnation of the Knight King. The truth was that the Twelve Swords of Promise existed, but they could never be found, for each of these swords lay inside the body of the Knight King.

A sword bathed in light and shining brightly appeared out of Leti's hand. Its glow was different than the cool, white light of the Knight Sword. The Sword of White Light was warm and gentle. Leti brought the sword to Astrid's chest and pushed it inside him.

“Stop that, Knight King!”

“I am granting Astrid the Sword of White Light, and I am driving you out from his body!”

What Leti was doing was a true Knighting Ceremony. It was the same one that King Christian, King Alexander and King Karlheinz did. The Knight King would grant his knight one of the Swords of Promise, which would in turn give the knight the strongest power imaginable. Leti did not plan on giving away any of the promise swords, but this was a special case, and she had to do it to save Astrid.

A normal knighting would have finished quickly and smoothly, but because the words for the Oath were simplified and Astrid's consciousness was still under the Ghost Energy's control, there was a lot of struggle and resistance.

“Astrid Gale! You are not the Ghost Energy! You are Astrid Gale!” called out Leti.

Her call reached Astrid, and Leti felt him respond. The paper knife, the Ghost Energy's true form, slowly went out of Astrid's body and fell on the floor, and the Sword of White Light fully

entered inside Astrid. Leti's arms gave way and she fell over him. She was exhausted, but she had one more thing left to do.

“...Just one last thing...”

Leti reached out her hand and hovered it over the Ghost Energy. She called the Sword of Hell Fire to purify it, burning it to ashes. Leti turned herself over and lay down on the stone floor filled with rain. The rain cooled down Leti's body, hot with all the action that transpired a few moments ago.

I can no longer wear this dress... and it was my favorite...

She was down and did not even have the energy to lift even a finger.

“...Your... High...ness?” Astrid's voice broke Leti's reverie. Astrid seemed fine already, so she asked him for a favor.

“If you can move, go and fetch a doctor for Duke and Onii-sama. As for me, let me rest for a while. I'm exhausted.”

The rain soon stopped. Once the rain clouds cleared up, the stars would definitely be mesmerizing.



おぼれ姫と
円卓の騎士

石田リンネ
Rime Saito

OKOBORE
HIME TO
ENTAKU NO
KISHI

ビーズログ文庫

OKOBORE HIME TO ENTAKU NO KISHI

The Leftover Princess and the Knights of the Round

Story by: Riine Ishida

Art by: Ichiko Okiya

Brought to you by:

[AQUA Scans](#)

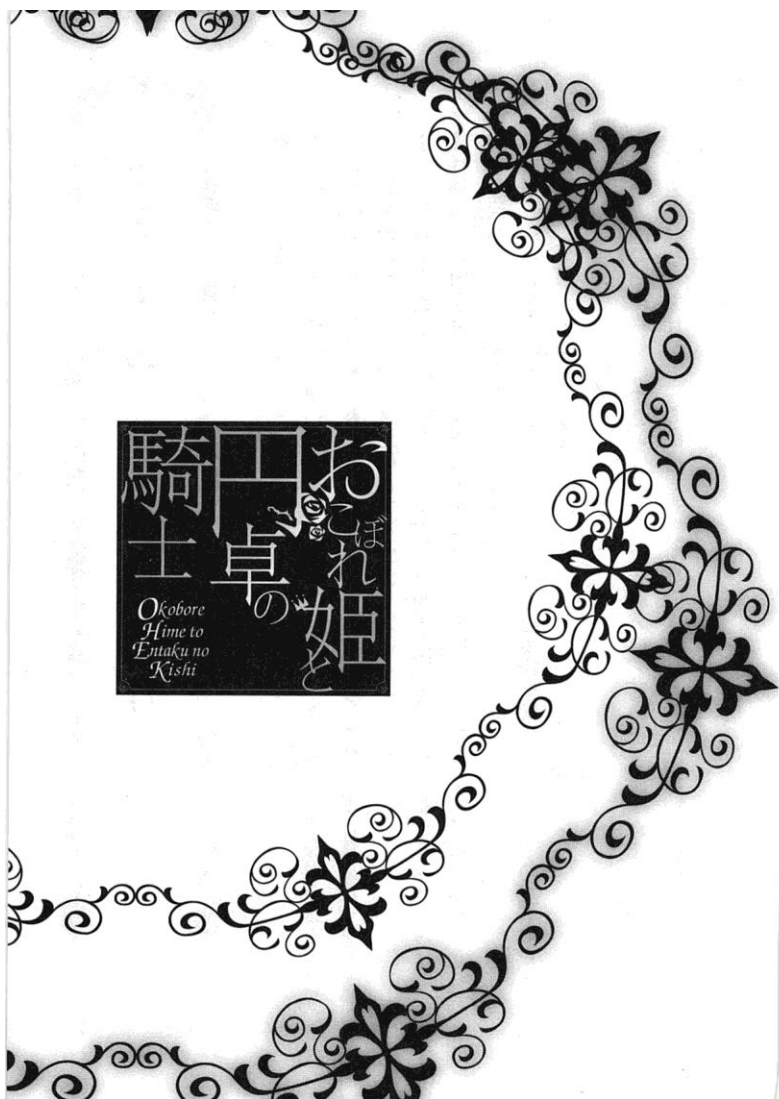
Credits:

- ❖ Raws: Icarus Bride
- ❖ Translation: Crystal Hikari
- ❖ Proofreading: Scylla
- ❖ Quality Checking: Mizuouji

Translator's notes:

The Japanese honorifics were kept in the translation of the dialogues of the characters to show the respect or adoration shown by the characters. Footnotes were provided upon the first appearance of the honorific in the chapter to explain it.

Thoughts are signified by '*italics*'.



EPILOGUE

“Do not let anyone come into my room! I feel awful with this runny red nose, painful throat, and coarse voice! I shall charge treason to anyone who dares come in here!”

“...is what my master has said so please withdraw for now.”

Friedhelm and Guido wanted to visit their sick younger sister but she would not even let them come in. Duke told Leti to at least let them see her, but she was indignant about it; insisting that ladies had their own circumstances that were to be respected.

“Such bad luck. To be the only one down with a cold out of the four of you who got drenched in the rain.” Guido said, making it unclear if he was being sympathetic or being sarcastic.

“But in the end we weren’t able to know who the attacker was. The Order already conducted an all-out search but found nothing, right? If only I’d seen his face...” Friedhelm was one of the victims but he immediately lost consciousness after being hit by the attacker and fortunately, he was not wounded.

“If only we had moonlight instead of rain, I might’ve seen his face clearly. Anyway, Astrid seemed to have given him a fatal wound so let’s just hope he’s already dying somewhere out there.” Duke, the other victim, said. But he, on the other hand, knew who the attacker was but was pretending not to.

Leti's testimony of the incident was the main source of information for the investigation and her testimony was far from the reality of what really happened. Her testimony went like this:

Duke noticed the assailant first but he, as well as Friedhelm, was knocked down. Lastly, the attacker was fatally wounded by Astrid but was still able to escape and is currently on the run.

When Duke regained consciousness, Leti coaxed him into saying that Astrid drove the enemy away and that he was not able to see the attacker's face because it was dark. Duke glared at Leti, communicating with his eyes that she would explain herself later, and followed what his master said and has pretended since then that he had not seen the attacker's face.

When the two princes gave up and said their goodbyes, "Go ahead and stay like that forever", Duke knocked on Leti's door informing her that her brothers had left.

"They went home already. Was that really fine?"

"Yes."

The voice from the other side of the door was a bit coarse. Duke relayed his get-well-soon-wishes and then stood away from Leti's door.

Just as Duke left, Leonhardt, Leti's full brother, came in with a book and a big package in his hands.

“Hey, hey, hey, Ane'ue!¹ I've brought you the book compiling the 'post-death' theories on King Alexander; 'cause I know you wouldn't want to read heavy literature even if you have a lot of time because of your cold.”

Leti put on her dressing gown, stood up, took the book from Leonhardt, and scanned it. He then placed the package on the side table.

“I do not remember asking you to bring me a stupid book.”

“I had a hard time doing research on that book, you know? You see, most of the time, searching for historical documents is a fruitless effort. If you're not masochistic in nature, you won't survive being a historian.”

¹ Ane'ue: A Japanese honorific used to address one's older sister. More old-fashioned than the common Onee-san

“I do not care about your masochistic tendencies,” retorted Leti, but her brother did not mind her at all and continued on with his story.

“The most ridiculous post-death theory actually has proof, you know? All the random coincidences are connected, though the argument itself is still weak. So here it goes. Three days after the execution of King Alexander, there was information about a blond, blue-eyed man boarding a ship headed to the South. Now, remember that according to historical records, a faithful knight of the Lion King dragged his body outside the country for three days, right?”

“So you are saying that the blond, blue-eyed man boarding the ship was him since the time frame and their features matched? And then?”

“And then a year after that,” continued Leonhardt, “There came a story about a pirate from the West assailing the Southern Seas. You see the fair complexion of Westerners stands out among the tanned skin of the South so that’s how they identified the pirate. So the connection is that this pirate is said to be the blond mans who was on the ship and who was, in turn, thought to be King Alexander. In other words, this pirate is believed to be King Alexander.”

“Quite forced, is it not?” Leti understood the point but was not convinced at all.

“The story does not end there. A few years later, a Westerner with blond hair and blue eyes was adopted and was made king through a marriage to a princess of a kingdom by the sea.”

“Another forced connection. So to summarize, the blond man who was on the ship to the South was King Alexander. He became a pirate and conquered the Southern Seas, married a Southern Princess and in the process became that kingdom’s king.” It was so absurd and unbelievable but that was exactly what cheered Leti up.

“I wonder if we can find a picture of the adopted king.”

“Thought you’d say that so I brought this with me.” Leonhardt picked up the package on the side table and showed it to Leti. “An artist descended from the Royal Family left a portrait of the king and it was included in King Karlheinz’ Art Inventory. But ironically, this painting debunks the whole theory. The man here does not look anything like King Alexander if we compare it to his portrait in the Gallery of Kings. *Hahahaha*.”

Lion King Alexander’s portrait displayed in the Gallery of Kings was highly exaggerated and dramatized to make him look

like an evil man and that, according to Friedhelm, was enough to warrant him the title of the Murderer King. But Leti knew that said portrait was nowhere near looking like the real Alexander for she had met the real Lion King in the Knight King's Space. However, the portrait of the adopted king was...

“...No, this looks like him.”

The portrait of the groom reflected Alexander's mature yet child-like, haughty face. It was a better depiction of the Lion King than the one in the Gallery.

“Oh...I see,” said Leonhardt.



Karlheinz probably came up with the same conclusion as Leti did. He might have learnt about the book, found the portrait, and thought that it looked like Alexander. So he included the absurd book and the portrait in the Royal Inventory, thinking that the theory was likely to be true.

“Thank you. That will do. I shall take a rest for now,” thanked Leti.

Leonhardt found his sister satisfied and left her to rest. Leti closed her eyes after she heard the door shut and hoped to meet in her dreams the king turned pirate turned king again. But as soon as she closed her eyes, she felt the wind blowing inside her supposedly closed room.

“—You know, you should ask Duke to teach you about proper etiquette around ladies.” Leti woke up and pressed the temples of her throbbing head. She was not sure whether her headache was due to her fever or to the new visitor.

“Your Highness! What I did last night was inexcusable,” begged Astrid, deeply bowing his head before Leti.

“What *is* inexcusable is what you did just now. Entering the room of a sick lady without permission, *and* through the window is

unheard of.” Scolding younger people was not a part of Leti’s hobbies but she had to teach Astrid proper manners.

“Anyway, putting that aside, it was fortunate that Duke was the only one who saw you last night. I have already warned him off so there is no need for you to worry.”

“But to raise a sword against a member of the Royal Family means rebelling against this country. I should be sentenced to death...”

“But I do not see you at fault. You are still young. It is better to die after you have served the kingdom with everything you have. You have just started and have not given anything at all, correct?”

“Yes!” Astrid smiled happily in answer to Leti's question. His smile was not his usual refreshing smile. It was a very humane smile, a smile that had overcome pain and hurt.

“Why did you save me, Your Highness? I’m sure killing me was easier?”

When Astrid fully assimilated with the Ghost Energy, he was able to see fragments of its old, old memories and in the process learnt about Leti's true identity by piecing together the memories and the conversation between Leti and the Ghost Energy.

“Duke was fond of you. I was certain he would be saddened if you had died. Be grateful for having such a good senior.”

“Thank you very much!” Astrid bowed his head once again in thanks.

“About the Knighting Ceremony, I do not have any plans on binding you to it. Go ahead and freely choose your master.”

“I will!”

Astrid became a knight of the Knight King because he received one of the Swords of Promise, the Sword of Light. But Leti told him he should not mind it at all because it was something that had to be done due to the situation.

“...ubmmm... Your Highness?”

“What?”

“I—I have already decided on who I want to be my master but I want to be like Duke-senpai². He chose his master and was chosen by his master. But right now, I don’t think the master I want to have will want to have me.”

² Senpai – a Japanese honorific used in addressing one’s senior

Leti sighed at Astrid's seriousness for she was certain that anyone would want to have Astrid as a knight because of his talents.

"Then you have to work hard. I had to work hard to get Duke. I would have to check my diary to know the exact number of times he refused me for I have already lost count."

"I will!" replied Astrid and he went out again through the window. This time, he remembered to make his footsteps heard, which Leti thought to remind him again that it was during these times when he should actually be silent. But she, in the end felt tired, knowing that reprimanding him would be meaningless.

"Hey, I heard footsteps just now...did he come?"

"Yes, a little while ago. You do not have to worry. Everything is over."

Duke went inside Leti's room after hearing footsteps rustling outside. He scanned the room and found the lock on Leti's window open. He thought it was unlikely for the sick Leti to get up only to unlock the window, thus his conclusion.

"Any plans on filling me in with the details?"

“I would not say I do have any plans. Let me think about it.” Leti sighed, thinking how she would explain the reality that sounded like it was straight out of a fantasy novel. That she was the reincarnation of the Knight King Christian and that Astrid was overtaken by an ancient enemy of the Knight King that took the form of a paper knife and that to save Astrid she had to grant him the Sword of Light, one of the Swords of Promise.

“Sorry about what happened. In the end, you had to fix everything on your own. And to think I’m the one Astrid relied on, too.”

“Do not be sorry. This problem was something personal in the first place. You need not feel responsible about it. I have to finish personal matters on my own. That’s it, the end. Say anything more about it and my fever will rise.”

I, unlike you, could not save someone simply because I like them. I guess I should be thankful for you, Duke, for providing me with an excuse.’

Duke looked like he wanted to say something more but respected Leti’s wishes.

“Duke, how are your wounds?”

“Fine. I was not wounded in any fatal areas. I’m alright... How ‘bout Astrid?”

Duke had to be the one to settle things about the incident in place of Leti, who had to rest due to her cold so he had yet to have the chance to talk to Astrid about the incident.

“...He is probably fine. He will be a good knight. I heard he has already set his heart on someone to be his master. I hope that person will be a good master to him.”

“I see...I wonder since when? Do you know who?”

“I did not ask that much. Only that he also wants his master to choose him.”

The best possible candidates for the master Astrid wanted was either Friedhelm or Guido but if he really thought about it, there was no need for him to check on Seventh Heaven or Valkyrie if Astrid wanted to join them.

‘Then could it be...it’s possible...but...No, no, no, no. He might have fallen in love with some noble lady out there...what is this feeling...?’

Duke kept on denying one possibility he thought of by thinking of other possibilities but the more he did, the more he felt something he could not name. The feeling was not anger, shock,

nor was it unpleasant either. But it was not a good feeling and Duke added another crease on his forehead, trying to figure out what the feeling was.



Tonight in the Knight King's space was One-armed King Oswald and Administrative King Karlheinz. Leti asked Karlheinz immediately about her most recent finding.

"King Karlheinz, have you encountered the portrait of an adopted king in a kingdom across the Southern Seas?"

"I, at least the current me, have yet to see one. Is it something interesting?"

"Yes. How unfortunate that I cannot talk to you about it."

They, the reincarnations of the Knight King, would never meet in reality, but here, in the Knight King's Space, they could cross time and share with each other their memories.

Realizing that Karlheinz would not include the absurd book and portrait in the Royal Inventory with no particular reason, Leti decided to change the topic.

“I recently cleansed one Ghost Energy left in my era. They are very taxing.”

“That was a hard job you completed, Queen Leticia,” praised Karlheinz even though in reality, he was the one facing more difficulties than Leti. She, in turn, told him to do his best and that everything would turn up fine. She then asked the other king who came from a time after hers.

“King Oswald, does Ghost Energy still exist in your time?”

“I have not come across one yet...but if a Ghost Energy comes out right now when the war has turned for the worst, the kingdom might as well fall and crumble...”

Oswald’s words were filled with truthfulness that neither Leti nor Karlheinz could laugh at it. Oswald was just as dark as usual; and to think he could just be a man of action all the time and not only when it was needed.

“Is King Karlheinz’ Art Inventory still intact?”

“Yes. It is still safe in the castle for now but it might just be a matter of time...”

“If you are already short on funds, selling them is one way to support yourself financially. That is one of its original purposes after all.”

Karlheinz did not collect those masterpieces solely because he was a lover of the arts but rather thought that the inventory could serve as a collection of items that could be sold in the future. Well, what could one expect from the “Administration King” who, with his superior abilities on policy and planning, rebuilt the kingdom’s nearly non-existent budget.

“I just hope there will still be citizens left who will give me a title like the Administration King and the Heartbreaker Queen.”

“Eh?”

“Ho.”

Leti knitted her eyebrows at the unexpected words. What did One-armed King Oswald say again? Administration King of course referred to Karlheinz, so the Heartbreaker Queen was...

“*Ack!* No, I did not mean to... *Aaah.* And Queen Leticia said there was no need for her to know the future. But please, do not let it bother you. You have a proper title. A great one!”

“...What do you mean?”

“*Ah,* just like the Heartbroken King Ludgar, you have a different title aside from your proper one...and that is the ‘Heartbreaker Queen.’”

Leti's eyes opened wide, her body shaking in anger as she heard Oswald's explanation.



“Oil Princess! Are you alright!?” Duke jumped into Leti's room when he heard her scream. But what he saw was Leti standing right in front of her bed and her body shaking.

“—Tell me, am I the sensual type?” Leti turned her head and asked Duke, her eyes were still and glassy.

“No? ...I mean you're more of the stoic type.”

She did not hate men but she was not interested in them either. That was how Duke comprehended his master.

“Yes. Exactly...so how can that possibly happen?”

Leti turned again and looked at her bed, thinking how in the world she could get such a title in spite of how she was.

‘The Heartbreaker Queen? Of all the titles I could get, why Heartbreaker? Just how many men did I gather that even my citizens knew about it?’

A name such as this would make her a laughing stock, just like the Heartbroken King Ludgar, despite everything they would have achieved.

“Future Queen Leticia!!! Come here and explain yourself!!!”

Duke silently slipped out of his master’s room for he was certain he would be receiving the bulk of Leti's anger.